

~~V.L.~~
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THE TENTS OF SHEM

A Novel

BY

GRANT ALLEN

AUTHOR OF

'BABYLON,' 'THE DEVIL'S DIE,' 'THIS MORTAL COIL,' ETC



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total extinction of French rule in Eastern Algeria.

‘Then all we have to do ourselves,’ the Amine was remarking, in soft earnest tones, as Blake jotted him down with upstretched arm so vividly in his sketch-book, ‘is to kill every man, woman, and child of the infidels down yonder at St. Cloud, with Allah’s blessing. The rest we may leave to the tribes to accomplish.’

‘That is all we have to do, son of the Faithful,’ the eldest marabout answered, with a wave of his hand towards the high mountains. ‘The Beni-Yenni and the Aith-Menguellath will take care for their part to crush out the garrison up above at Fort National.’

‘You are fools to try,’ a strong and stalwart middle-aged Kabyle in a red hood, standing a little apart from the group by himself, remarked quietly, with a sneer on his face. ‘The French can crush you as a camel’s foot crushes ants in the desert.’

They crushed you so in the disgrace of 1251'—for by that name the great but abortive insurrection of 1870 is universally known to the Moslems of Algeria.

'Hark at Amzian!' the Amine cried contemptuously. 'He's half an unbeliever himself, I know, because he was a Spahis, and served in France. The women of the infidels made great eyes at him. They have shaken his faith. He puts no trust in Allah. He is always discouraging the true believers from any attempt to recover their freedom.'

'I am no infidel,' Amzian answered angrily, with a toss of his head, folding his bernouse around him with pride as he spoke. 'I am no infidel; I am a true Moslem; the Prophet has no more faithful follower than me; but I have been to France, and I know the French, how many they are. Their swarms are as locusts when plague-time comes. They would crush you as the camel crushes ants in

the sand. Why, the people of Paris alone, I tell you, Amine, are like flies on the carcase, more numerous than all the tribes in Kabylie.'

'Allah is great,' the Amine retorted piously. 'The least among His people are stronger, if it be His will, than thousands of infidels.'

'He didn't help us in 1251,' Amzian suggested, with some reserve.

'Ay, but the time has now come, so the marabouts say,' the Amine responded, with a rapid glance towards one of them, 'when Islam is to rise all together in its might against the hordes of the infidel. Has it not come to your ears, unbeliever, how the Christians have been driven by the Mahdi out of the Soudan? How the enemies of the Faith hardly hold Suakim? How Khartoum has been taken by the hosts of Allah? The day of the great deliverance is at hand. Islam shall no longer obey the dogs of Christians.'

‘We shall never drive the dogs of Christians out of Kabylie,’ the sceptical Amzian murmured once more, with secular hard-headedness, ‘as long as the French are drilled and armed and officered as they are, while we are but a horde, and as long as they hold the keys of Fort National.’

‘Let us ask Hadji Daood,’ the Amine ejaculated, much shocked at such rationalistic latitudinarianism. ‘He has been to Mecca, and has seen the world. He knows better than any of us, who stay at home in Kabylie, whether these things are so or not.’

The meeting applauded with a silent clicking of some fifty tongues. The intimate knowledge of French internal affairs to be acquired during a coasting voyage from Bougie down the Tunis seaboard to Alexandria and Jeddah, naturally gave the Hadji’s opinion no little weight upon this abstruse question.

‘Hadji Daood ben Marabet,’ the Amine

said solemnly, interrogating the old man as a new Parliamentary hand might interrogate a veteran of many Sessions, 'do you think, or do you not think, the French are so very strong that they could crush us as a camel crushes a desert ant-hill?'

Hadji Daood ben Marabet wagged his gray old head solemnly, in the sight of the meeting, till the caftan nearly fell off his bald shaved pate.

'I have been to Mecca, Amine,' he answered, with infinite dignity, 'and seen the kingdoms of the world and all their glory; and this is the word I have to tell you: the might of the infidel is as dust in the balance to the might of the faithful and the servants of Allah.'

The Amine glanced triumphantly at the annihilated Amzian, who retired, abashed, into the shade of his bernouse.

'But the French are so strong,' he murmured still, with the native irrepressibility of the born heretic, 'that they will crush

us all out as they crushed out Mokrani, who fought against them in the great insurrection.'

The Amine took no more notice of the discomfited and discredited ex-European soldier. Why should he give himself such airs, indeed, and pose as an authority, merely because he had been beaten at Sarrebrouck and at Gravelotte?

'It is clear, then,' the Amine said, continuing his discourse, 'that Allah is going to deliver the infidels into the hands of His people. Our part in the work is to attack St. Cloud, and slay every man, woman, and child—but, above all, to kill Madame l'Administratrice.'

'Why her in particular?' Ahmed asked, with a smile. 'Is she so much worse, then, than all other Christians?'

'She is a Christian,' the Amine answered, 'and that alone should suffice. When the marabouts proclaim a Jihad, a holy war, every Christian in Islam is alike our enemy.'

But the woman of the high heels is the worst of them all. Was it not she who called us "pigs of Kabyles"? Was it not she who destroyed the shrine of the great saint, Si Mahommed Said with the Two Tombs, to erect in its place a dancing-pavilion in her own garden? Was it not she who forbade our women to come and weep on Fridays at the spot where the blessed Sheikh El-Haddad, the blacksmith, poured out his great life for Kabylie and Islam, because their wailing interrupted her peace when she read the vile books, full of orgies and wickedness, she brings over from Paris?

'And when our people would have taken the stones of the shrine to erect them again here at Beni-Merzoug,' Hadji Daood cried, doddering, 'it was the woman of the high heels who refused to give us them, because she wanted the tiles from the holy place to adorn her bed-chamber, and the carved marble from the pillars and the coping-

stone to make the base of her wanton summer-house.'

'Therefore for this,' the Amine went on piously, with a solemn ring, 'we will dash out the brains of the woman with the high heels against the marble parapet of her own summer-house, and give her bones to the jackals to eat on the shrine of Si Mahommed Said.'

'And every soul that lives in her house,' the Hadji droned out, waxing stronger with the excitement, 'we will kill and destroy in honour of Allah and of Mahommed His Prophet.'

'So be it,' the Amine assented, with a grave nod.

The Kabyles around bent their heads to the ground in token of approval.

'Hush!' the Amine cried, in an authoritative voice, looking round him suddenly, and perceiving a diversion. 'The spirit of prophecy has come over the marabout.'

As he spoke, a marabout stood out for

one moment from the busy throng, his eyes wild and fierce, and his mouth foaming. He turned himself round once or twice slowly on one foot, as on a pivot; then waxing faster and faster as the excitement increased, he whirled round and round violently for several minutes, with a rapid and angry swaying movement. At last he paused, looked round him in ecstasy, and drove a pin through his outstretched tongue with a face free from all signs of pain or emotion. As they looked, he began to recite, deep down in his throat, a sort of droning song in a long, irregular, native metre:

'The Frenchmen came; they said, *Bonjour*; in an evil day they said *Good day* to us.

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The Frenchmen came; they said, *Merci*; we have little to thank them for teaching us *Thank you*.

The Frenchmen came; they said to us, *Frère*; with brotherly love have they kicked us and bullied us.

The Frenchmen came; they called us *Cochon*; dogs and mules had more honour than we have.

The word of Allah came to His marabouts: Stir up My people against the dogs of infidels.

Whom shall we stir up, oh, All Wise, oh, All Powerful?

The sons of the Kabyles against the sons of the Frenchmen.

The Beni-Yenni to the gates of Fort National ; the Beni-Merzoug to Saint Cloud in the valley.

Slay every soul in Saint Cloud, ye Beni-Merzoug ; slay, and obtain the blessing of Allah.

Slay, above all, her of the high heels ; bring down her proud head in the dust of her highway.

Slay every soul that comes under her roof ; the desecrated roof of Si Mahommed Said.

Let those who robbed my dead saint be requited ; let those who dishonoured his holy bones be punished.

Slay, saith Allah, by the voice of His marabouts, slay—slay with the sword ; kill all, and spare not.'

The marabout sat down, collapsing suddenly, as if the fire of inspiration had all at once been withdrawn from him. The pin still held his tongue between his teeth. The foam at his mouth was reddened with blood. The Kabyles around looked on admiringly.

There was a short pause, during which no one spoke aloud, though many whispered ; then Amzian the unbelieving asked, somewhat incredulously :

'And when will you begin this Jehad against the infidel?'

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sponded, bowing his head. 'We will wait and be governed by the event that arises. Events crowd thickly in these latter days. The house of the infidels is divided against itself. Have you not heard that there will soon be new wars again between the people of *Oui-Oui* and the people of *Ja-Ja*?'

'It is true,' Amzian assented, 'that the French and the Germans are likely to have war when he who is now Sultan of Germany bites the dust in the ground before Allah.'

'When that time comes,' the Amine said solemnly, 'let every believer draw sword for Islam.'

'So be it,' the assembly assented once more, with faces all turned of one accord towards Mecca.

At that point the meeting was about to break up informally, when Amzian, with a backward jerk of his thumb, called attention to the presence of strangers in the gallery.

'How about *them*?' he asked, with a

sniff, indicating by the contemptuous movement of his hand the spot where Le Marchant and Blake were sitting.

‘They are English,’ the Amine replied ; ‘they are not French. The English are good. I know their mind. My brother Yusuf was himself an Englishman.’

‘In a Jihad,’ Ahmed, Meriem’s rejected suitor, remarked, with the air of a man who propounds an indifferent abstract principle, ‘all infidels alike are commanded to be slain, without fear or favour, without lot or exception.’

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‘When I was at Mecca,’ the Hadji interposed, leaning upon his staff with his trembling hands, ‘I met many Moslems from Sind and Ind, who swore by the Prophet’s beard they would as soon live under the Sultana of the English as under the Caliph of the Faithful himself at Stamboul.’

‘But if these infidels find out, they will spoil all,’ Hussein grumbled, from a corner. ‘They see far too much as it is of our women.’

‘Meriem is their interpreter, and speaks their tongue,’ the Amine interposed, in a deprecating voice. ‘They pay me well for the milk they buy, and for the grain, and for the *cous-cous*, and for the rent due for the site of their encampment. I have given a fresh coverlet to the shrine of our Saint out of part of the rent they have paid us for encamping.’

‘If this thing gets about among the women,’ Ahmed observed, with a sinister scowl, ‘there will be no keeping a word of it from the girl Meriem.’

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found secrecy. 'We do not blab to our women like the Christians. We can keep our own counsel. We are men, not children ; of Islam, not infidels.'

'Let no man speak a word of all this to his wedded wife,' the Hadji cried, raising one skinny palsied forefinger. 'If it reaches the French, we shall know it was the English ; if it reaches the English, we shall know it was Meriem ; if it reaches Meriem, we shall find out what traitor's wife has told her. And whoever it is, French, English, or Moslem, they all shall die, by the beard of the Prophet.'

'What an impressive attitude !' Blake cried, looking up. 'He's finer even than the dervish fellow we saw at Algiers. I think I'll just stop and sketch in the old boy while you go and write that letter, Le Marchant.'

CHAPTER XIX.

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'Perhaps he thought me the likeliest person to do justice to the girl,' Iris suggested timidly.

‘Tut, tut, tut,’ Uncle Tom responded, growing redder than ever. ‘Justice to the girl, indeed! What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba? He’s casting a sprat to catch a whale; that’s the long and short of it. A cock-and-bull story as ever I heard in my born days. If I were you, my child, I’d take no more notice of it. If the young woman of dusky complexion and doubtful antecedents chooses to prosecute her shadowy claim, let her come to England—the Courts are open and there are Deputies—and let her prosecute it reasonably by her attorney-at-law, with all due formalities, in the ordinary manner. Then we shall know exactly how to deal with her. Deny everything, and insist upon proof. That’s the way to meet it. Make her explain her father’s survival, his change of name, his marriage, his decease, his unaccountable intestacy. Make her produce her mother’s marriage lines, her certificate of birth, her vaccination marks, her papers generally. Till then, we don’t need

to trouble our heads one jot or tittle about the matter. We don't want to get up a case against ourselves for the benefit of a supposititious young woman in Africa.'

But, unfortunately for Uncle Tom, he had a client to deal with in this case who was not to be put off with forensic generalizations or legal quibbles of the most respectable antiquity.

'If the girl really exists, and if she's really Uncle Clarence's daughter,' Iris stuck to it firmly, 'then she, not I, am heiress to the estate; and I won't rob her, not even for you, uncle dear, much as I love you.'

'*Daughter*,' Uncle Tom remarked sententiously, 'is in English law a word of a precisely definite and circumscribed meaning. It means, connotes, implies, or designates lawful female issue of his body begotten. And when we say lawful, we mean, of course, born in wedlock, in Christian wedlock, of a kind recognised by Act of Parliament, or (within certain limits) by the *lex*

loci of the country where the marriage was actually solemnized. Now, supposing even your Uncle Clarence did really desert, run away from his colours, and marry a young woman of dusky complexion and doubtful faith, in some out-of-the-way corner of the North African mountains, that's nothing to us. The offspring and representative of the dusky young woman thus irregularly annexed has got to prove, in the first place, that her putative father, deceased, lived long enough to survive your late Uncle Alexander. If he didn't do that, be she ten times over his lawful daughter, not a penny does she get by the singular terms of your grandfather's will—and a pretty mess your grandfather made of it. But if he did survive his elder brother, then and in that case there still arises the further question—Did your Uncle Clarence ever marry the dusky young woman aforesaid, of North African origin, in any sense recognised by the Christian religion and the common and

statute law of this country? That he did so marry her is in the highest degree, I think, improbable—to put it mildly, in the highest degree improbable—and if he didn't, why, then and in that case the dusky young woman number two, his natural offspring, has nothing more to do with you, by the law of England, than any other dusky young woman, assorted, of the same race, place, and religion.'

But Iris, oddly enough, with true Knyvett obstinacy, held out to the last for her own view of this ethical question. She boldly maintained, against so great an authority as Uncle Tom himself, that if Meriem was Uncle Clarence's daughter, then, the law of England to the contrary notwithstanding, Meriem must be her own first cousin. She further maintained that, as a biological fact, a father and his children were indubitably connected one with the other by physical origin. She refused to believe that the law of England itself could

possibly annul that primitive underlying law of nature. And she insisted with incredible and most annoying persistence that as soon as the weather grew cool enough in Africa she would herself proceed in person to Algeria to see the girl whom she believed to be her cousin, and to investigate the passive claim set forth on her behalf to Uncle Arthur's property. 'For if it's justly hers,' Iris said most resolutely, 'nothing on earth would induce me to keep her out of it.'

So the end of it all was that early in November, Iris herself, with her mother and uncle, crossed over to Algiers, as the eminent Q.C. preferred to phrase it, 'on their fool's errand.' It was hard to leave England at such a moment, indeed; but Uncle Tom felt that if any tomfoolery, as he called it, was likely to go on, it was best at least he should be on the spot to prevent it from taking the wildest flights of Quixotic extravagance. So, with a very bad grace, he consented to come over, consoling himself,

at any rate, with the thought that Iris would thus take personal possession of Sidi Aia, and that if the thing was to be investigated at all it was best it should be investigated by a competent person familiar, by long experience, with the practice of the Probate and Divorce Division.

The fickle Mediterranean used them kindly ; and it was at three in the morning of a clear starlight night that the good ship *Ville de Naples* of the *Compagnie Transatlantique* brought them fairly in sight of the shores of Africa. Mrs. Knyvett had retired early to her cabin for the voyage, and would not have risen from that safe retreat had Mont Blanc, Niagara, and the Golden Horn pressed themselves simultaneously at a single burst upon her maturer vision. But Iris was young, and youth is impetuous, even when duly chastened and restrained by three years' diligent pruning at Girton. So the Third Classic rose up in haste at Uncle Tom's muffled report of 'Land in sight!'

and went up on deck in a thick ulster for her first glimpse of Africa and golden joys.

And what a glimpse it was, that night arrival, as the steamer ploughed her way slowly round the corner of the mole into the great dim harbour! In front, a vast rising mass of streets and gas-lamps, clambering in endless steps and stages up the steep face of a mysterious mountain. On either hand, a small fleet of dancing boats, crowded with strange Arabs in their Oriental dress, all shouting and calling in loud guttural voices. To right and left, dark ranges of hills, silhouetted vaguely against the deep African sky, and crowded with faint white specks of villas. Everywhere lights that danced and quivered on the rippling water; everywhere bustle and noise and confusion; everywhere the strange sense of a foreign land—not foreign like France, or Germany, or Italy, but Southern and African and vivid and Moslem.

Iris waited on deck till the day dawned,

and saw that wonderful town of Algiers—the ‘pearl set in emeralds,’ as the Arab poets loved to call it—swim slowly into ken in the gray light of morning. It was a beautiful sight—a sight to be remembered and treasured through a long life-time. First of all, a white solid mass of marble detached itself by degrees in clear relief from the background of the dark mountain behind it. Tier after tier, it rose to the sky as if hewn in one block from the quarries of Carrara. Streets or alleys there were none to behold; the flat-topped houses, each square as a die, clustered close in one tangled continuous block, as though not even a needle could be thrust in between them. Dark alleys threaded that labyrinth, no doubt, but so tortuous as to be hidden by the overhanging houses and projecting doorways. For twenty minutes these solid white steps alone were distinctly visible; then bit by bit, as the light grew clearer, the picture began to resolve itself piecemeal into its component

elements. In the foreground, a public square, stately with tall date-palms; a snow-white mosque, with big round dome, and tile-faced minaret; a splendid French boulevard, arcaded like Paris; a range of vast and costly quays, thronged with the commerce of Marseilles and of Liverpool. In the background, the congested Arab town, rising up like a staircase to the huge dismantled citadel of the Deys that crowned the summit of a spur of the Sahel. To the right, the sea; to the left, the smiling slope of Mustapha, frequent with villas, Moorish, French, or English, each lost in the brilliant green of luxuriant gardens. Toulon below, Beyrout above, Torquay and Cannes and Stamboul beyond—that was the strange cosmopolitan picture that Iris Knyvett beheld before her.

Uncle Tom had telegraphed from Marseilles to the people at Sidi Aia, so everything was in waiting at the quay to receive them. The invaluable Maltese who acts as

commissionaire arranged to see their luggage through the Customs, and follow them up with it in due course; so the Knyvetts and Uncle Tom had nothing to do but to get into their carriage and drive up quietly to their own villa.

Iris was, in principle at least, a Socialist. 'We are all Socialists now,' a big man has said, so I suppose there's no great harm in confessing the fact openly. But the female heart is fickle on principles; and when the Third Classic beheld the gorgeous Arab coachman, who sat on the box, with his braided blue jacket, his maize-coloured girdle, his full white trousers, and his crimson fez, she felt in her heart it would be hard indeed to give up all these for the service of humanity. They rolled along smoothly through the crowded streets, past Arabs on donkeys and Arabs on foot, in every variety of dirt and griminess; past Moorish women, muffled to the eyes, and gliding silently by the wondering infidels;

past the Kabyle market in the open square, alive with Oriental bustle and commotion ; through the Porte d'Isly, with its curious collection of maimed and halt beggars ; and up the long ramping gradients of the road that leads by slow degrees to the suburb of Mustapha. It seemed an endless drive, in the cool morning air, with an interminable succession of country Arabs coming in to market on their mules and their donkeys. Villas innumerable lined the road, embowered in thickets of bamboo or date-palm, and draped with great clustering masses of Banksia roses or crimson Bougainvillea. Some of them showed Moorish architecture at its best, with their beautiful arcades and their stately doorways. Iris hoped in her heart Sidi Aia would turn out like one of these, and not a great staring square French château, like the house on the hilltop, with no sense or tinge of local colouring, so utterly out of place with all its natural and artificial surroundings.

At the little Colonne Voirol they reached the summit, and swept sharply round into the road to El-Biar. In two minutes more, Iris's heart beat high with delicious hope, as the carriage turned into the courtyard of the loveliest and most native-looking Moorish house they had yet beheld upon that delightful hillside.

What a court it was, that shady vestibule! A marble fountain spurted in the midst, set about with tall arums and graceful water-weeds. Orange-trees and palms grew inside in clumps; an open arcade of horseshoe arches, with twisted marble columns of antique workmanship, ran entirely round it in an Oriental quadrangle. The floor was covered with dainty old tiles: a string-course of the same, in still lovelier patterns, set off the pediment of the arcade above with their exquisite beauty. It was a dream of delight, come true by accident: a glorious dream, too good for solid earth: the sort of home one sees in one's fancy in the Arabian

Nights, but never hopes or expects to come across as a fact in this workaday world of prosaic realities.

Iris mounted, awestruck, and too full for speech, from the uncovered court into the inner entrance-hall. It was a second courtyard, somewhat smaller than the first, but covered over above with a glass roof, so as to form an anteroom or central focus to the villa. A double arcade ran round it, above and below, both of delicate Saracenic arches, but the lower one open through all its length, while a balustrade of richly-carved woodwork formed a fitting parapet for the upper gallery, stretching in a line from pillar to pillar, and just high enough for a person to lean upon comfortably. The floor was of marble, covered with rich old Oriental rugs: tiles still more priceless than those of the outer court accentuated the structural lines of the building. From the *étagères* on the walls gleamed curious old trays of wrought brass, inlaid with Arabic

inscriptions in graven silver; the niches in the wall, formed by marble slabs beneath the graceful flat arch peculiar to Algiers, were decorated with exquisite pieces of native pottery, Kabyle and Tangierine, or from the Aurès mountains.

Iris's heart swelled high at the sight, with the pride of possession. At that moment, if the truth must be told, her waning Socialism had dwindled away by rapid stages to what her Cambridge friends would, no doubt, have described as a negative quantity. It had reached vanishing-point. The deceitfulness of riches was too much for her principles.

On the short flight of steps that led from the outer to the inner court, two old women stood, with smiling faces, to welcome Iris to her new home.

'You are Zélie, I think,' she said to one of them timidly, in her boarding-school French, a broken dialect that sat not unbecomingly on those pretty lips.

And Zélie, proud that her name should be remembered by the grand young lady, answered fervently:

‘I am Zélie, mademoiselle, and glad to welcome *une dame si aimable* to the walls of Sidi Aia.’

‘And you’re Sarah, I suppose,’ Iris went on in English to the other old woman, taking her hand in hers, and grasping it cordially.

‘Yes, my lady, I’m Sarah,’ the English-woman answered, returning the grasp with sudden warmth. ‘God bless your pretty face, and your sweet young eyes, my dear! They told us you’d wear a pair of blue spectacles, and be able to talk nothing but Greek and Latin.’

‘Iris,’ Mrs. Knyvett remarked severely, shocked at such familiarity on the very threshold of their Algerian experiences, ‘don’t you think, my child, we’d better go on and see the drawing-room?’

‘If you like, darling mother,’ Iris an-

swered, with a bright smile, 'though I've seen enough already to drive me frantic.'

And in three minutes more she was stretched at full length upon the big window seat with the Tlemçen rug, looking out through the beautiful little Moorish arches, past the waving date-palms and tall yuccas of the garden, to the blue bay that shimmered with silver in the morning sun, and the snow-clad peaks of the Djurjura in the distance. Nay, more; to crown all, for an Englishwoman's heart, old Sarah had brought them up a cup of good strong English tea, with cream complete, on an antique tray with blue porcelain cups, set out on an inlaid ebony and ivory Damascus table. Bagdad and Cairo swam before her eyes. Iris's heart was too full to speak. '*Nil non laudabile vidi*,' she murmured to herself. Socialism for the moment was at a distinct discount. A house like this was too beautiful, surely, for Dives to share with that ignorant and tasteless fellow, Lazarus.

CHAPTER XX.

AWAY TO KABYLIE.

AT Sidi Aia the Knyvetts and Uncle Tom spent four or five days most enjoyably for themselves—as indeed well they might, for a more charming home exists not even on the sunlit slopes of Mustapha Supérieur. Iris, for her part, was never tired of wandering through the beautiful garden—her own garden—oh, most unsocialistic but most natural thought!—admiring the lilies, and the orchids, and the scarlet amaryllises, and the rich profusion of her own namesake irises. Though it was mid-November, the beds still blossomed gay with endless flowers; the rich bloom of the loquat-trees perfumed the heavy air, and the

delicate bells of the great white African clematis hung in long festoons from every straggling bough on the hillside opposite. Iris had never seen such wild luxuriance of sub-tropical foliage before ; the walks in the grounds of Sidi Aia itself, relieved by glimpses of the other neighbouring white Moorish villas, with their flat roofs and their horseshoe arcades, scattered over the green slopes on every side, transported her mentally, on some enchanted carpet, to the dreams of her childhood and the terraces of the good Haroun-al-Rashid.

But, seductive as Sidi Aia proved to the economic ideas of the Third Classic, and subversive of all the good socialistic opinions she had carried away with her from the Cambridge lecture-rooms, it nevertheless did not prevent her from realizing the fact—the sad, sad fact—that her first business, now she had got to Africa, was to find out the truth about this girl Meriem. The moment, to be sure, was unpropitious

for such thoughts. In the garden at Sidi Aia, Iris confessed to herself, not without sundry internal blushes, that it would be hard to give up all these lovely things to the rightful heir, if the rightful heir should prove to be indeed this vague, shadowy, half-African cousin in the recesses of Kabylie. Till she came to Algiers, she had never fully felt what wealth implied; now that she saw how much of the beautiful and graceful it could buy or keep, she was loath at heart to shuffle it off too easily.

Nevertheless, that uncomfortable Knyvett conscience of hers drove her on, in spite of her own unwillingness, to inquire into the whole case as presented for Meriem. They must stop at Mustapha for a few days only, to rest after their long and hurried journey, and must then go off on their expedition to Kabylie.

So, on the third morning of their stay at Sidi Aia, the imperious young heiress bundled Uncle Tom unceremoniously into

town by main force to make full inquiries of Sir Arthur's agent as to the best way of proceeding to the mountains, and the nature of the accommodation a Christian party might expect when it got there.

'Try to find out a nice hotel, there's a dear,' she said caressingly; 'and arrange to go as fast as we can to this place on the hills to hunt up Miss Meriem.'

Thus exhorted, Uncle Tom set off with sore misgivings, but as in duty bound; for he felt he was but clay in the hands of the potter before that clever, self-willed, coaxing little Iris. While he was gone, his niece went out with old Sarah for a stroll in the garden once more—she could have passed a lifetime in that lovely garden—and being still a woman, though a Girton graduate, she there pursued her sociological investigations at full leisure into the manners and customs of the adjacent proprietors.

'And who lives in that great white

house on the left, Sarah?' she asked with unaffected feminine curiosity; 'the house where the three ladies in white morning-dresses stand at the window so much with their hair let down, and make mysterious signs to the Arabs in the vineyard?'

Good old Sarah laughed a quiet little laugh. 'Why, that's Dr. Yate-Westbury's,' she said with some reluctance, 'and those ladies you see at the window's his patients.'

'What! Not the great mad-doctor?' Iris cried with a start.

'Mad - doctor! Well, yes, that's just about the truth of it. Mad he is, if you give me the word. They're all of 'em as mad as their patients, the mad-doctors. Dr. Yate-Westbury—his particular form of madness is Algiers. He thinks Algiers is good for everything, from paralysis or apoplexy to pain in the little finger. Have you got consumption? Then go to Algiers.

No place on earth like Algiers for the lungs. Air's tonic, bracing, and highly exhilarating. Can't you sleep at nights? Then go to Algiers. No place on earth like Algiers for sleep. Air's sedative, soothing, and extremely unexciting. Are you sound in your mind? Then go to Algiers. The very place to give you rest and amusement without undue over-stimulation. Are you going off your head? Then go to Algiers. The very place to give you change and variety, with a new type of life and Oriental scenery. That's how he goes on. He's a specialist, he is—a specialist with a vengeance. He's got but one treatment for all diseases. His diagnosis, poor dear Sir Arthur used to say, is, "You're wrong in your chumps," and his therapeutics are, "and Algiers 'll cure you."

'A mild form of mania,' Iris answered, smiling at the old woman's unexpected command of the recondite resources of the English language.

‘Yes, my dear, but there’s method in his madness, too,’ old Sarah answered, with a wise look in her eyes. ‘He makes his living out of it, mad or sane. . . . He takes in patients at three guineas a day, and he has land to sell for eligible building-sites on the road to El-Biar.’

‘You know too much, Sarah,’ Iris answered with a laugh. ‘You’re quite a cynic. Cynicism’s a thing I always dread. If you talk like that, I shall be afraid to say another word to you.’

By second breakfast-time, Uncle Tom returned, much fatigued, from town, very red-faced, and mentally flustered.

‘Well, Iris,’ he said, mopping his forehead with his famous red silk handkerchief—that handkerchief dreaded by many a nervous witness—‘this is a pretty wild-goose chase, indeed, you’ve brought upon us! Talk about an hotel! Says the girl: “A nice hotel, uncle!” Why, Watson assures me there’s not a European house,

good, bad, or indifferent, within five miles of the place where Clarence Knyvett's alleged daughter is said to live; and these two young vagabonds who hunted the Claimant out for your edification camp out themselves, *à la belle étoile*, he tells me, in a canvas tent, on the top of a mountain. There's a style of life, indeed, for an elderly barrister! Pretty sort of mess this you've gone and got us in!

'Now, don't flare up, there's a dear!' Iris answered soothingly, stroking his arm. 'I suppose we shall have to camp out, too; that's all there is to be said about it. In a climate like this, and in fine weather, camping out must be simply delicious; and so romantic to tell the girls about, you know, when one goes back again home to England.'

'Romantic! — rheumatic, you mean!' Uncle Tom cried angrily—for he hated romance with all his heart; he had seen too much of that sort of thing in the

annals of the Probate and Divorce Division. 'Your mother's bronchitis would never allow it. Besides, there are panthers and jackals and heaven knows what, Watson tells me; centipedes and scorpions crawl over you as you sleep, and tarantulas drop on to your bald head as you recline at your ease in your own quarters. Added to all which, the Kabyles are in a very discontented state — smouldering, smouldering, and he thinks an insurrection might break out any day.'

'I don't mind panthers,' Iris murmured, with a face somewhat damped by incipient disappointment; 'and I rather prefer scorpions than otherwise, but I must confess I should draw a line myself at a native insurrection.'

'Most insubordinate people, according to Watson,' Uncle Tom continued, rubbing his hands, and improving his opportunity as soon as found. 'Might cut your throat and your mamma's any evening. Perfect

savages, it seems, in their frightful ways —perfect savages.'

'But couldn't we go and stop with Meriem?' Iris asked innocently.

Uncle Tom held up his hands in unutterable dismay. 'Impossible! my child,' he cried. 'Impossible! impossible! You'd have to pig it with the goats and the cattle. There's not a house in Kabylie fit for a Christian to live in, everybody says, except at two places, called St. Cloud and Fort National. St. Cloud's the nearest post to the village where the dusky young lady of African origin has pitched her tent, and Watson assures me, if we *must* go to Kabylie, which he strongly deprecates, the only practicable thing to do is to stop with the wife of the Administrator of the settlement.'

'But we can't invite ourselves!' Iris cried aghast.

'Well, Watson thinks,' Uncle Tom continued, much against the grain, but urged

by an inward sense of duty to disclose the facts, 'that the lady in question would be only too glad to get the chance of having us, she's so badly off, in those remote parts, for European society. She's a gay little body, it seems, of Parisian proclivities and much intelligence, who's been buried alive in a hole among the mountains for heaven knows how long; and she's only too glad to get anybody to stay with her who'll bring her up the last Algerian gossip and the newest patterns of Paris fashions.'

'I'm afraid,' Iris said, glancing down at her own neat and simple tailor-made costume, 'I shall hardly satisfy her requirements in that respect; but how can we manage to get an introduction to her?'

'Oh, that's done already,' Uncle Tom replied, with some conscious pride in the successful carrying out of his unwilling mission. 'Watson's given me a letter in due form to the lady's husband. He

knows him well. Here it is, you see :
“ À M. l'Administrateur de la Commune
Mixte de St. Cloud-en-Kabylie.”

‘ What’s a Commune Mixte ?’ Iris asked, examining it.

‘ A mixed community, I suppose,’ Uncle Tom answered with a certain tartness. ‘ At any rate, we won’t get our throats cut there ; for Watson says, even if there’s a rising, St. Cloud can hold its own against a thousand Kabyles. It was entirely cut off in the last insurrection, to be sure, by a night surprise : almost every man, woman, and child in the place exterminated. Our proposed hostess herself only escaped with her life by walking across the snow for miles in her nightdress and *peignoir*. The insurgents killed all the inhabitants first, to make quite sure of them, and afterwards hacked them into very small pieces for their own amusement. But that’s a mere trifle ; since then, I’m told, the fort has been strengthened, and it’s now partially brick-built, and capable

of standing some days' siege. So that at St. Cloud we shall, doubtless, be comparatively safe. Even if there's a rising, as there's very likely to be,' Uncle Tom repeated, playing his trump card once more for emphasis, 'it could hold its own against a thousand Kabyles.'

This telling little speech Uncle Tom delivered with considerable nonchalance, directing it straight, with no small cleverness, at his pretty niece's timid head; and for a moment, indeed, Iris wavered visibly. Her face blanched and her lips quivered faintly at the casual detail of the hacking in pieces. Then that strong and obstinate Knyvett idiosyncrasy of hers came to her aid once more.

'Very well, uncle dear,' she said quietly, without pretending in any way to notice his frequent hints of serious danger. 'I'll write to this lady this very afternoon, and ask her if she can tell us where to put up if we go to St. Cloud: for that, I suppose, is the

only way I can broach the subject. But, Uncle Tom, there's a dear, whatever you do, don't mention the question of the rising to mother.'

CHAPTER XXI.

A STRANGE MEETING.

A FEW days later, by the tent door at Beni-Merzoug village, Meriem sat conversing eagerly on the ground with Eustace Le Marchant.

‘Well, I’ve read all the novels now, Eustace,’ she said with a smile of profound satisfaction, ‘and I’ve learnt from them, oh! ever such a lot about England. I do like novels. I don’t know how I ever got on without them. They are so full of queer facts; they tell one about a life so different from our own; by talking so much with Vernon and you, I think I’m beginning at last a little to realize it. But I want more books to read now: our Kabyle proverb says,

"The kid only gives you an appetite for the goat"—and Vernon's got no more to give me.'

'Why not try this?' Eustace suggested with a smile, laying his hand on the painter's 'Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics.'

'No ; not that,' Meriem answered, without the faintest embarrassment. 'I like those better when Vernon reads them to me. He makes them sound so much nicer than I can.'

'How about mine, then?' Eustace went on, crestfallen.

'I was looking over yours in the tent yesterday, but I don't think I could understand them much. I took down this: "The Prodrumus to the Entomology of North Africa"'—she'd got the long words quite pat now—'but it's so full of queer names I don't understand, and it's not very easy, and it isn't so interesting as "A Princess of Thule." I like "A Princess of Thule" best of all, I think, and after that

“The Rise of Silas Lapham.” But there’s one of your books I believe I could understand—one all about the “Conversation of Energy.”’

‘Conservation, Meriem,’ Le Marchant corrected, laughing. ‘My dear child, your education’s really going on a great deal too fast if you think of tackling Balfour Stewart already.’

‘But I want to learn all I can,’ Meriem answered earnestly, ‘in case—in case I should ever—be taken—to England.’

‘Meriem,’ Le Marchant said, with a very grave voice, ‘Vernon will never, never take you.’

‘Then why does he talk to me so beautifully, and read me such verses, and paint me so often?’ Meriem answered, with tears rising quick to her big brown eyes. ‘I think, Eustace, he really likes me. And, perhaps, if only I could make myself fit for him——’

‘Meriem!’ the painter cried, at that critical

moment, putting in his head at the flap of the tent, 'I want you out here again, at once. I've just got an idea for a most charming picture.'

Meriem brushed away a tear with the corner of her haik, unperceived, as she thought (though Eustace marked it), and went out, smiling, to the too-seductive Vernon.

'Look here,' the painter said, over-trustful now of his own powers, 'I've been sketching those girls laying out their clothes on the bank to dry, and I want you to stand in the foreground here and let me fill you in, wringing out a haik, as my central figure.'

Meriem knew no law but Vernon Blake's will. 'Very well, Vernon,' she answered meekly, and posed herself as he wished her, in a simple and natural attitude, like a Greek statue.

'Why do you always paint *me* so much, and not the other girls?' she asked, after a pause, as he went on with his sketching.

‘Why, your cousin Iris will be coming soon,’ Blake answered in explanation, altering slightly, with irreverent hands, the pose of one shapely arm and shoulder. ‘You’re by far the prettiest girl in the place, and I want to make hay while the sun shines—to make the best of my opportunities before the great lady comes and takes my beautiful model away for ever.’

‘I’d rather stop here,’ Meriem murmured slowly. She took his admiration, without surprise and without false shame, as a natural tribute.

‘But she won’t let you,’ Blake answered with a laugh; ‘she’ll carry you off bodily, and send you to college, like herself, at Cambridge.’

‘I should like that,’ Meriem said, brightening up; ‘for then I should be—wise—like any Englishwoman.’

‘I wonder if you’ll like her,’ Blake observed carelessly. ‘She’ll be an awful swell, I expect; six or seven thousand

a year, at least, so Le Marchant tells me.'

'Will she be dressed like Madame l'Administratrice, do you think?' Meriem asked, with a sigh. 'High-heeled boots and a tall hat? For, if she is, I don't fancy I shall care for her.'

'She will, no doubt,' Blake answered, going on with his sketch; 'the mirror of fashion and the cream of society. And she won't say a sentence about anything on earth that either you or I can understand a word of.'

As he spoke, the silence of the mountain-side was suddenly disturbed by a loud British voice exclaiming in mingled French and English: 'Well, *nous voilà* at last, madame; *c'est ici Beni-Merzoug*; and a jolly break-neck ride up these beastly hills we've had for it, too, haven't we, Iris?'

Meriem looked up, and beheld before her eyes a strange and till that moment unheard-of apparition. Two European ladies in

riding-habits and hats sat patting the smooth necks of their weary horses ; while behind them, on a short, stout mountain pony, a short, stout gentleman, with a very red face, mopped his hot, moist brow with a large and still redder silk pocket-handkerchief. One of the ladies Meriem recognised at once as Madame l'Administratrice ; the other she had never seen before, but she knew, of course, from the old gentleman's words, it was her cousin Iris.

‘Now, my child,’ the stout gentleman remarked, disembarking with some difficulty from his precarious saddle—for he was no cavalier—‘don’t you come into the tent at all. Madame and I will see this man Le Marchant by ourselves at first, and find out how much he wants to get out of us.’

Meriem would have answered, proudly and angrily, at once, so much did the unexpected imputation sting her ; but Vernon Blake, anxious to see this little comedy played out in full to its natural close, and foreseeing

sport, held one warning finger up to his lip, and Meriem forthwith stood mute as a statue.

So Uncle Tom and madame disappeared into the tent, and Iris, leaping lightly from her graceful Arab, which half a dozen Kabyle boys from the village, expectant of *sous*, volunteered with many salaams to hold for her, walked frankly up, with her habit in one hand and her whip in the other, to the embarrassed painter.

‘We must introduce ourselves, I suppose,’ she said, with a sunny and delicious smile. ‘My name, as I suppose you will already have guessed, is Iris Knyvett; and you, no doubt, are one of Mr. Le Marchant’s camping companions?’

‘Your name,’ the painter answered, with a half-frightened bow, ‘all the world knows, even here in Kabylie. The very last thing I read in print, before leaving Algiers, was the leader in the *Times* on your achievement at Girtou.’

Meriem, posed opposite them in her attitude as model, could not fail to notice, with quick, womanly instinct, how far more deferential and courteous was his manner to the grand English lady than it had ever been to her poor Kabyle cousin.

‘I’m afraid you have still the advantage of me,’ Iris said, with a glance at his beautiful sketch ; ‘for you haven’t yet given me your half of the introduction.’

‘My name, I fear, won’t convey so much meaning to you,’ Blake replied modestly, ‘as yours to me. It’s Vernon Blake—by trade a painter.’

‘You mistake!’ Iris cried, with pleased surprise. ‘I know your work well. I’ve seen it at the galleries. You painted that beautiful little study of an Italian child in last year’s Grosvenor.’

To Meriem, who knew nothing of all these things, this talk was indeed gall and wormwood. It was cruel of Vernon to put her to such pain ; but he had held up his finger

to her, and, obedient to that sign, she still kept silence.

The painter's cheek flushed with pleasure. 'I'm glad you liked it,' he said, 'and flattered that you remember it. This, too, will make a pretty little sketch. It's natural, isn't it?'

'It is. And your model's beautiful,' Iris cried enthusiastically. 'What a charming figure! She reminds one of Nausicaa.'

'Eh . . . quite so,' the painter responded, dropping his voice suddenly, with a dubious tone.

There was a moment's pause, during which curiosity and the natural desire to conceal his ignorance fought hard for mastery in Vernon Blake's mind: then he ventured at last to inquire with caution, 'Er . . . who did you say my model reminded you of?'

'Nausicaa,' Iris repeated in an 'of course so' sort of tone. 'You must know Nausicaa, I'm sure; in the "Odyssey," you remember.'

‘I’ve never read the “Odyssey”’ the painter said shortly.

‘Ah, you took up the “Iliad” instead, I suppose,’ Iris went on with gentle persistence. Blake allowed the rash conjecture to pass in silence unquestioned. That anyone should have read no Homer at all seemed to her inconceivable. She knew more than her companion : so much was clear—and Meriem hated her for it.

‘How extremely fair she is!’ Iris continued, observing the trembling Kabyle girl with critical eyes. ‘I’d no idea there were people in Africa anything like as European-looking and Greek as she is. Genseric and his Vandals must have left a great deal of their blood, no doubt, stamped deep on the soil in Mauritania generally.’

‘No doubt,’ Vernon Blake assented, with caution above his years ; though who the dickens Genseric might be, or what the Vandals were doing in Mauritania, what-

ever that was, he had no more notion than Meriem herself had.

‘Her eyes are exquisite. You’re lucky to get such a model as that,’ Iris went on, unconcerned. ‘But her feet are perhaps just a trifle——’

Meriem’s honest nature could stand it no longer. ‘Vernon,’ she cried aloud, in an agony of blushes, disregarding the beck of his commanding finger, ‘it isn’t right, you know; it isn’t true to her; you shouldn’t let her go on supposing in this way I don’t understand English. . . . She might say something she didn’t intend me to hear, you know, Vernon.’

Iris drew back, thunderstruck, in a vague tumult of surprise. She recognised in a moment, of course, who the Kabyle girl was that could thus easily and idiomatically address the painter in his native English. But the shock was none the less instantaneous and electric. Never till that morning had it for one instant occurred to her that Uncle Clarence’s daughter would not be

dressed like an ordinary Christian—simply and even coarsely or poorly indeed, but still in the common and recognised garb of female Christendom. That this barefooted Kabyle girl, in haik and girdle, with her flowing hair and her Phrygian cap, was the cousin she had come so far to find, fairly took her breath away on the first blush of it.

For a minute they stood at gaze on one another from a safe distance—Iris with the curiosity of a stray visitor to the Zoo; Meriem with the terrified and startled look of a beautiful wild animal brought suddenly to bay. Then Iris slowly moved forward to greet her.

‘You are my cousin Meriem!’ she cried, with a flushed, hot face; and, even as she spoke, she took the beautiful girl’s two hands in her own. Next instant, yielding to a sudden gracious impulse—for blood, after all, is thicker than water—she folded poor trembling Meriem to her bosom, and kissed her on both cheeks with impulsive affection.

In a second, Meriem's heart had burst with delight at the grand English lady's goodness and condescension. Those simply chosen words, 'my cousin Meriem'—that one touch of nature that makes the whole world kin, as she folded her to her bosom—had conquered at once the proud Kabyle reserve in Meriem's nature. With a fierce flood of tears, the graceful wild thing cast herself passionately at Iris's feet, and, raising the hem of her riding-habit in her hand, kissed it fervently with her lips a dozen times over.

'Iris, Iris,' she cried, 'I love you! I love you! You might kill me now. I should love you for ever.'

Iris raised her from the ground, with a startled face, half terrified at this unexpected outburst of feminine emotion.

'Meriem!' she exclaimed, 'my dear child, dear Meriem; you mustn't throw yourself at my feet like that, for worlds! We're cousins, you know. I've come all the way

from England to meet you and know you.' And she clasped the poor girl once more—with more genuine and unaffected tenderness this time—to her own soft bosom.

'You may go back again, then, if you'll take me with you,' Meriem cried impulsively; 'for now that I've seen you, and know what you're like, I could never take from you one penny of your money. I never wanted it at all myself. All I want is to be near you, and love you.'

At that moment, as they stood there with arms clasped tight round one another silently, before the open heaven, Madame l'Administratrice appeared unexpectedly at the tent-door. The incredible sight made her start with alarm.

'Mon Dieu!' she screamed out volubly, in her shrill little voice, to Uncle Tom within. 'M. Vitmarsh, M. Vitmarsh, come quick and see. *C'est incroyable, mais c'est vrai. Voilà mademoiselle votre nièce qui embrasse une indigène!*'

CHAPTER XXII.

A THUNDERBOLT.

THINGS had gone badly for poor Uncle Tom. He had stepped unawares into the lion's mouth. When the astute old lawyer saw that disconcerting sight from the door of Eustace Le Marchant's tent, he felt that chance had indeed dealt roughly with him.

He took it all in at a glance, of course: so this was the young woman! The Claimant! The Impostor! While he had been talking with the enemy, Le Marchant, in the gate, the young woman herself, losing no time in prosecuting her vigorous assault, had surprised the citadel, and carried it by storm. Nay, what was

worse, she had even enlisted that ill-regulated and susceptible Knyvett heart of Iris's on her own side. There he found them, hugging like a pair of fools—plaintiff and defendant in the self-same cause, as thick as thieves one with the other. The foe had suborned a traitor in the camp. This wily Kabyle girl—pretty, no doubt, undeniably pretty; as a man of taste, Uncle Tom could not pretend, in his own mind, to burke that patent fact; but a savage for all that—a mere African savage—trusting to her pure cheek and her physical charms, had made an easy prey of his poor trustful Iris. Those Knyvetts, you see, were always so unpractical. No Whitmarsh on earth would ever have acted like that, Uncle Tom felt certain. No, indeed! Quite the contrary. A Whitmarsh would have held the alleged daughter of the late Uncle Clarence at arm's length securely, and refused to acknowledge off-hand this shadowy claim

to an uncertain consanguinity. A Whitmarsh would have fought the matter out, inch by inch, to the bitter end, insisting upon proof at every step, and refusing to accept a single weak fact, a single shaky or illogical inference. While these Knyvetts, you know—bah! it made the eminent Q.C. sick to think of it: so Quixotic; so sentimental; so ignorant of the wiles that were simple matters of everyday experience to an old hand in the Probate and Divorce Division.

If only she had been black, or even dusky, now, as Uncle Tom had always anticipated! But a pucker white woman—as white as himself—and handsome into the bargain! Was ever Q.C. more disastrously fitted with a susceptible client and a dangerous opponent?

It was with difficulty that the disheartened old lawyer finished that evil day's work; but since chance had so brought things about that the first in-

vestigation meeting, so to speak, must needs be held before a committee of the whole house, he decided to make a virtue of necessity, and invite Iris and the Claimant herself—to Uncle Tom Meriem was, henceforth, simply the Claimant—to take part openly in their deliberations.

‘Iris, my dear,’ he called out, in a somewhat testy tone, ‘come into the tent here, and bring that—that young person with you.’

‘Come along, Meriem,’ Iris said, as one speaks to an old friend, leading the timid Kabyle girl by the hand, like a child, to the tent-door. ‘Uncle dear,’ she whispered gently into his ear, ‘she speaks English, and she’s a sensitive creature. Now, for my sake, there’s a darling, don’t be hard on her, or harsh to her.’

Pretty; and sensitive! Oh, Lord, what luck! He must hold his tongue, it seemed, in presence of the impostor, for fear the truth should hurt her delicate feelings!

‘You’ve got an uncle, young woman,’ Uncle Tom observed, with a severe look, fixing a jury-box eye sternly on Meriem. ‘I think it would be better that this uncle should be represented, personally or by counsel, if I may be allowed the expression, at this preliminary investigation.’

‘What does he say, Iris?’ Meriem whispered, awestruck.

‘Don’t be afraid of him, dear,’ Iris whispered in return, clasping Meriem’s hand tight in her own. ‘He’s a little rough, you know, but he’s awfully kind and good, for all that. He only wants you to send for your uncle.’

‘I didn’t know Englishmen ever talked like that,’ Meriem answered simply. ‘Vernon and Eustace never speak to me that way.’

Meanwhile Uncle Tom had murmured something in French to Madame l’Administratrice, which Meriem didn’t understand. The flippant little Frenchwoman nodded acquiescence.

‘*Va chercher l’Amine!*’ she cried, in an authoritative voice to Meriem.

The girl caught the meaning, though not the words, and disengaging her hand gently from her cousin’s, rose up and glided at once from the tent, ‘like a Greek goddess,’ Iris thought to herself, as she followed her with attentive eyes, admiringly.

‘Yes, a very fine walk,’ the painter put in, interpreting her thoughts; for he, too, had joined the party in the tent. ‘You see, these girls are so free in their movements, and accustomed to carry such heavy weights on their head from early childhood, that they grow at last to step evenly poised, like Queen Mab or Titania.’

The English allusions sounded strange to Iris; she herself would have said, in a similar case, ‘Like Athene or an Oread.’

In two or three minutes, Meriem returned, preceded by the Amine, quite *endimanché*, in a better bernouse than Le Marchant or Blake had yet seen him in.

‘*Assieds-toi là,*’ Madame l’Administratrice exclaimed in an imperious voice, pointing with her sharp forefinger to a low box-seat in the furthest corner.

Iris was surprised at the haughty *tutoiement*, especially as the Amine, in his best Friday clothes, seemed altogether so much more dignified and important a personage, with his tall, supple body and his Oriental gravity, than the skimpy and volatile little high-heeled Frenchwoman.

The Amine’s eyes flashed fire angrily, but he restrained his indignation after the Oriental wont; and with a polite bow and a ‘*Bonjour, mesdames; bonjour, messieurs,*’ took his seat in the corner where superior authority had so cavalierly relegated him. The melancholy and pathetic Kabyle expression in his large sunken eyes made Iris feel an instinctive respect and sympathy towards the grave old man.

‘Ask him first, madame,’ Uncle Tom said officially, in such French as he could

command—it was perfectly fluent and profoundly insular—‘if he can tell us the precise date of death of this man Yusuf, alias Leboutillier.’

The tears rose quickly into Meriem’s eyes at hearing those most sacred of all names to her so roughly pronounced, but she, too, bit her lips to still her emotion, and, for Iris’s sake, held her peace painfully.

The Frenchwoman repeated the question to the Amine in French, with an inquisitorial air of legal accuracy. But the Kabyle only shook his head in the utmost dismay.

‘*No comprend lingua Franca,*’ he answered helplessly, in the one phrase of that old barbarous jargon which still survived in his native mountains.

‘Ask him in Kabyle, then, madame,’ Uncle Tom persisted.

Madame l’Administratrice started as if she were stung.

‘Do I understand Kabyle, monsieur?’

she exclaimed indignantly, as who should repel a slight upon her personal gentility.

Uncle Tom beamed out at her from his respectable spectacles in mild surprise.

‘Am I to gather, then,’ he said, with wide-open eyes, ‘that you’ve lived for fifteen years on end in Kabylie, and can’t yet speak one word of the Kabyle language?’

‘Not a syllable! not a letter! not a jot! not a tittle!’ madame disclaimed energetically, with a profuse gesture. ‘If these pigs of *indigènes* desire the pleasure of my spirited conversation, let them go and learn French themselves at school, and then they can talk to me.’

‘The loss is certainly theirs,’ Uncle Tom responded, with unwonted gallantry.

‘Meriem can interpret for you, uncle dear,’ Iris suggested coaxingly. ‘Only,’ she whispered somewhat lower in his ear, ‘try to put your questions so as not unnecessarily to hurt the poor child’s feelings.’

'This was really too much for Uncle Tom's equanimity.

'My dear,' he whispered back, with legal firmness, 'such a proceeding would be highly irregular—highly irregular. To make the Claimant herself our interpreter in the case would be to turn ourselves over, bound hand and foot, to any nonsense she may choose to palm off upon us.'

'I think,' Le Marchant interposed, with a quiet smile, 'if you will allow me to try, my slight knowledge of Kabyle will probably suffice to put such a very elementary question as the one you suggest to my friend the Amine here.'

Uncle Tom glared at him with angry eyes, but could not very well say him nay. A conspiracy, of course; a most patent conspiracy! but, after all, they were not on their oaths. In a purely private and informal investigation, irregularities of this sort might perhaps be condoned in his client's interest. They'd be sure to let

out some damning fact or admission between them.

Le Marchant put the question to the Amine in a few simple words. The Kabyle shook his head in utter perplexity. A date to an Oriental, an exact date within a stray year or two, is an undreamt-of pitch of historical accuracy.

‘It was about three years since,’ Meriem said, in English, with tears still standing in her big brown eyes, ‘for I remember it was just about the time when we gather the olives.’

Uncle Tom gave a comical look of despair. Was this the kind of evidence as to date, forsooth, to tender to a leader in the Probate and Divorce Division of her Majesty’s High Court of Justice?

It was Blake’s turn now to interpose with a suggestion.

‘I think,’ he said, turning over the pages of his sketch-book hastily, ‘I have something here that may cast light on the

matter.' And hitting on the particular sketch he required as he spoke, he passed the open page over to Uncle Tom with polite carelessness.

Uncle Tom accepted the strange item of proffered evidence under mute protest, and without prejudice. As a matter of principle, he didn't believe in the documentary value of an artist's sketches. 'They're never sworn to before a Justice of the Peace, as the Act directs. Still, he cast a hurried glance, for form's sake, at the particular drawing thus confidently pointed out to him. It was a rough sketch of the mouth of a cave, overgrown with lichens and maiden-hair ferns ; and it bore on its front a bold inscription in plain Roman capitals :

'CLARENCE KNYVETT,

SUA IPSIUS MANU FECIT :

ANNO HEGIRÆ

MCCLXIV.'

Uncle Tom started, but restrained his surprise.

‘It’s not without merit, viewed as a work of art ; but what does it *prove*?’ he asked, half angrily.

‘I don’t know,’ Blake answered, retiring abashed. ‘I’ve really no idea. The same question’s been asked about “Paradise Lost,” I believe, and I could never answer it. I suggest it merely on general grounds, as tending to show Clarence Knyvett may have been alive at least as late as the year 1264 of the Mahommedan era. It’s an inscription that Le Marchant and I found on the face of a rock high up on the slopes of Lalla Khadidja in the Djurjura Mountains. It gave us our first clue, in fact, to the curious problem of Meriem’s parentage.’

‘Those words were the last thing Yusuf ever wrote,’ Meriem murmured, half aloud. ‘He must have written them just before he fell from the rocks, when he was hiding from the French, who wanted to shoot him.’

‘And when was the year 1264, I should

like to know?' Uncle Tom sneered contemptuously. The date had such a remote, mediæval sound about it.

It was an unfortunate observation, from Uncle Tom's point of view, at least; for even as he spoke, Iris, pulling out her purse, consulted a small pocket-almanac. 'It began,' she said, after a short but abstruse mental calculation, 'on April the 20th, 1883.'

Uncle Tom gave a short, sharp whistle to himself—a whistle that he checked a minute later with a distinct air of being (as a Bencher of Lincoln's Inn) very much ashamed of himself.

'This is what comes of sending girls to Cambridge,' he thought to himself inwardly, in a very bad humour. 'They're so proud of being able to calculate a date that they supply arms and ammunition gratis to the camp of the enemy.—Let me see that book, Iris,' he went on aloud, in no happy tone. 'Year of the Hegira, 1268, commencing

April 20th, 1887. H'm, that'll do. Now, don't be precipitate.'

But his warning look and uplifted finger were thrown away upon poor eager Iris, who, profoundly interested in the facts of the case, and anxious only to arrive at the truth, forgot to consider her own *rôle* in Uncle Tom's little extempore drama.

'Why, uncle,' she cried, with a flash of intuition, 'Uncle Alexander died at Bath—I've got it down here among the memoranda you gave me that day at your office—on April the 4th, 1883 ; and Clarence Knyvett wrote this inscription not earlier than April the 20th in the same year. Therefore, he must have survived Uncle Alexander, and he, not Sir Arthur, was the real inheritor of the Knyvett property.'

A thunderbolt could not have fallen more heavily on poor Uncle Tom. No turkey-cock that ever strutted a farmyard was half so red in the face as he at that moment. He would have given the world just then if

only he could have flung down his brief on the table before him, and remarked sarcastically: 'After what my client has just admitted, my lord, there's nothing now left for me to do but to retire at once from the case, and leave him entirely in the hands of the jury.' But here, unhappily, was a client whose cause he could not throw up, come what might—a client with an impossible and incredible fancy for playing into the hands of her own opponents.

'My dear,' he whispered in her ear, in an agony of shame, disgust, and terror, 'leave it to them to say all that; and don't concern yourself at all with Clarence Knyvett. What we have to do first is to solve the question, When did the man Yusuf die? After that, we have to ask ourselves next, Was Yusuf identical with Joseph Leboutillier? Only in the third place can we come to the question, Were Yusuf and Joseph Leboutillier in turn aliases of your uncle, Clarence Knyvett?'

‘Yusuf died accidentally, by a fall from a cliff,’ Le Marchant put in, carrying on the problem of the date at issue. ‘Surely there would be something like an inquest or *procès verbal* held on his body—some statement of the cause of death in the *actes de l’état civil* at St. Cloud’—and he turned round with a question in French to Madame l’Administratrice.

‘*Est-ce que je sais, moi?*’ the little lady answered, with a screwed-up face and a shrug of her shoulders. ‘Do I take note of the death of this, that, or the other *indigène*, think you? *Qu’est-ce que ça me fait, à moi, monsieur?* My husband can tell you, perhaps. He keeps a register of these events, possibly.’

‘My father fell over the cliff,’ Meriem put in suddenly, after a long and abstruse effort of reason in the endeavour, by the aid of Iris’s almanac, to correlate the Christian and Mahommedan calendars, ‘some time in November, 1883; I know it now by the

date of the Moharram. A man came up from Algiers to search for him——’

‘A French detective,’ Le Marchant interposed. ‘So one of the Fathers at St. Cloud told me.’

‘And Yusuf thought that if he remained at Beni-Merzoug, the man would find out his French name, and get them to shoot him,’ Meriem went on, with an evident and painful struggle. ‘So he went and lived in the caves in the Djurjura, and there he fell over a cliff and died ; and that’s all I can tell you about it.’

‘Why,’ Iris exclaimed, with a flushed face, ‘that must have been the detective—you remember, Uncle Tom—that Sir Arthur sent up to make inquiries about him. And Uncle Clarence must have mistaken who it was that sent the man, and why they wanted him. And so he must have fled from his own property and his own people at the very time they were trying hardest to discover him.’

Uncle Tom's face was a study to behold. It would have made the fortune of some rising *genre* painter. Such a client as this he had never had to deal with. She would spoil the best case that ever was briefed. She gave up everything at the mere nod of her dangerous opponent.

'My dear,' he said slowly, aloud this time, 'you're making a great many most unwarrantable assumptions. *If* the inscription's really genuine, which we don't know—I give no opinion; it may or it may not be—and *if* Yusuf was the man Leboutillier; and *if* Leboutillier was your uncle Clarence; and *if* we can trust these people's evidence——'

He got no further, for, as he said those words, Meriem rose up like a statue before him.

'Iris,' she cried earnestly, taking her cousin's hand once more in hers, 'I love you! I love you! I'll speak to you; I won't speak to him, because he distrusts

me and doesn't believe me. Nobody ever distrusted me before, not even the Kabyles. Don't let him come here any more to inquire. I can't bear to hear him speak like that about my dear dead father. I loved Yusuf, and I love him still. I'm glad you've come. I'm glad you're my cousin. But whether the money you've come about is yours or mine, let's say no more about it. I hope you'll keep it. I want none of it. What good is it to me? All I want is to know my father's friends. And if you'll let me love you, I need no money.'

'Uncle Tom,' Iris said, flushing red in return, 'let her off, there's a dear! She means what she says. You're hurting her affections. If we want to set this matter right at all, we must set it right without bothering Meriem.'

They rose to go, but Meriem clung to her.

'Iris,' she whispered, 'come again soon,

and see me alone. I want to talk to you.
I want to be friends with you.'

'I'll come again soon, dear,' Iris answered with a kiss. 'I love you, too, Meriem. I think I understand you.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DIFFICULT CLIENT.

THEY mounted their horses and rode back towards St. Cloud in moody silence. Madame l'Administratrice indeed, to do her justice, chatted volubly and flippantly all the way. But Uncle Tom and Iris, in no mood for gossip, contented themselves with an occasional nod or a smile of acquiescence. Their minds, to say the truth, were otherwise engaged than with madame's regrets for her Parisian luxuries. Uncle Tom was in a distinctly bad humour; and with Uncle Tom that always meant that the case was turning out very ill for his client. He couldn't conceal from himself two obvious facts: first, that it looked very much indeed

as though the man Yusuf and Clarence Knyvett were really one and the same person; secondly, that it looked very much indeed as if Clarence Knyvett had really outlived his brother Alexander. If these things were so, two points alone could save his client's case. In the first place, it was pretty certain that Clarence Knyvett could never have married Meriem's mother in any sense recognised by the Probate and Divorce Division. In the second place, it was also pretty certain that no good legal proof was forthcoming of the identity of Yusuf with Joseph Leboutillier. Comforting his soul with which two specious legal quibbles, Uncle Tom directed his mountain pony cautiously homeward in no little internal perturbation.

As for Iris, she rode on with equal regret at many results of this strange interview. At the very first blush of it, her heart had gone forth to her unknown cousin. There was something about Meriem's simple nature

that she felt civilization could never rival. She was vexed in soul that Uncle Tom, with his Lincoln's Inn suspiciousness and his Old Bailey wit, should have gone against the grain of that fine natural character. But, furthermore, the practical outcome of that morning's work had strangely discomposed her own plans for the future. Let Uncle Tom and the legal aspect of the case quibble as they might, in simple equity Iris felt sure that Sir Arthur's property belonged, by right, to Meriem only. She didn't doubt now that Meriem was Clarence Knyvett's only daughter, and that Clarence had survived his brother Alexander. Thinking so, her soul, like her Homeric hero's, was divided this way and that within her. For, on the one hand, her strong sense of justice and her clamorous, imperative Knyvett conscience made her anxious to see abstract right done to Meriem, let what might follow. *She* could not fight over legal quibbles, where the truth was clear, or pre-

tend to hesitate about questions of identity when Uncle Clarence's daughter stood visible in the flesh, a true Knyvett, before her. If Meriem was the heiress, provable or not, let Meriem take the goods that belonged to her.

But, on the other hand, Iris felt with a pang it would be hard indeed to give up Sidi Aia. Six thousand a year had moved her little; mere money stated in pounds sterling means not much to a very young woman. But now that she had seen Sidi Aia, and felt the pride of possession in that exquisite home, it would be hard indeed to give it up to the rightful owner. She wished she had never seen it at all, so as never to know the pain of parting with it.

'I believe in Meriem, Uncle Tom,' she ventured to observe timidly, at last. 'I don't think she wants to get Uncle Arthur's property.'

Uncle Tom's ill-humour grew deeper as he went, the case looking blacker and blacker on reflection. 'The girl's a mere tool,' he

answered sullenly. 'She's dupe, not knave. *She* won't do much harm to us. It's that man Le Marchant who's egging her on. It was he who invented this cock-and-bull story. He means to marry her, and prosecute her claim. Exactly what I told you has really happened. He read your advertisement, and saw his chance of setting up a new sort of Tichborne Claimant. Of course it was he who carved that inscription.'

'I never thought of that!' Iris cried with surprise, half clutching at the straw, if only it could save her that beautiful Sidi Aia. 'But the painter said he saw it too, and I somehow fancy the painter's a good young fellow. With a face like that, he could hardly be otherwise. I never saw anybody handsomer or more transparent.'

Uncle Tom grunted. 'You'd learn to distrust your own brother,' he said shortly — 'supposing you had one—if you'd practised half as long as I have at the Bar of the Probate and Divorce Division.'

Iris was silent for a few minutes more. Then she said again, 'There's something inexpressibly weird to my mind in the coincidence that one brother should be living in luxury in Algiers——'

'No coincidence in the world at all about it!' her uncle answered testily, with a burst of ill-humour. 'Your logic's bad. That's always the case with you Cambridge graduates. If you'd only been to Oxford, now, like me, you'd see at a glance that the thing's a matter of mere ordinary sequence. Your uncle Clarence came to Algiers as Joseph Leboutillier—so much's admitted on all sides ; and it was his coming over here first that entailed in the end all the rest of our coming—Sir Arthur's, and yours, and mine, and your mother's. Sir Arthur came, like us, to assure himself his brother was comfortably dead and buried ; and, not being burdened with a young woman of Cambridge education and fanciful proclivities, *he* was lucky enough to satisfy himself

offhand of the fact, which is more than *we* seem likely to do, confound it! He found the climate and the country suited him, so he bought Sidi Aia out of the money of the trust, in accordance with the terms of the Admiral's will; and small blame to him either; for a prettier or sweeter place I never saw, though you *do* want to fling it at the head of this claimant. Where's the coincidence in all that, I'd like to know? Now, where's your coincidence? A simple ordinary matter of natural cause and effect—that's just what a logical Oxford mind calls it.'

'But how painful to think,' Iris went on reflectively, without heeding his interruption, 'that one brother was living in luxury and splendour at Sidi Aia, while the other brother, the real heir to the property, was skulking for his life in fear and trembling among these snowy mountains, and dependent for his bread upon the charity of the Kabyles!'

‘That’s just it,’ Uncle Tom went on with dogged calmness, crushing down his own doubts the better to crush down and annihilate his niece’s. ‘That’s just what I say. Is it likely? Is it credible? Is it in accordance with all we know of human nature? If he was the heir to this fine estate—for it is a fine estate, Iris, though you want to shuffle it off on the bare-legged young woman of doubtful antecedents—would he go hiding and starving in a cave on the mountains, instead of coming down, and saying openly: “Here am I, Clarence Knyvett, the rightful owner, come to claim my own; get out of my house and give me up my money”?’

‘You forget,’ Iris said, ‘that the French would have shot him, and the English sent him into penal servitude.’

‘I don’t forget it,’ Uncle Tom repeated with some asperity. ‘I don’t forget it. I never forget anything. It’s a habit I’ve acquired in the course of my practice. But

do you think anybody in his senses would shoot or imprison the heir to a splendid property like that? No, no, my girl; I know the law in its practical working in all countries. Shoot a poor devil of a deserter, if you like, with three sous in his pocket, and nobody 'll bother about it; but not a man who can ask the General of Division to dinner at Sidi Aia, with *pâté de foie gras* and a magnum of Veuve Clicquot.'

Iris was silent. Young as she was, she knew the world well enough already to guess there was probably a good deal of truth in Uncle Tom's cynical contention.

'Well, now, Iris,' Uncle Tom went on, drawing rein for a second as they reached the village, 'I've had enough of your co-operation in this matter, I can tell you. I mean to hunt up the rest of the question myself, with the aid of an interpreter—I suppose there's *somebody* here at St. Cloud who understands this beastly Kabyle lingo—and sorrow another word shall you have

to say to it. You may fraternise with the bare-legged young woman of doubtful antecedents as much as you like in private—I've nothing to say against her as far as she goes : she's a well-meaning tool of that man Le Marchant's ; but never again shall I let so incompetent a junior as yourself be with me in a case of such prime importance. I've taken away the brief from you, so remember in future I manage this business alone, in my own fashion.'

As they passed out of the street at Beni-Merzoug, Hussein and the marabout had watched them depart from the sacred grove by the little domed tomb of the village saint. ' There goes she of the high heels,' Hussein cried out mockingly, in his own tongue, at the same time that he bowed his head deferentially almost to the ground before her.

' In Allah's good time,' the holy man answered, ' her proud head shall roll in the dust before the face of Allah.'

‘ And these others who have come to her from over the sea ; shall we slay them too ? ’ Hussein asked with languid interest.

‘ Is it not written, “ The Lord knows His own ” ? ’ the marabout replied, looking vacantly before him. ‘ When the Faithful unfurl the flag of a Jihad—a holy war—they respect not persons ; they destroy utterly the enemy of Allah himself, and his house, and his slaves, and his servants, and his friend, and the stranger that is within his gates, leaving not one living soul behind them.’

‘ The biggest one—her with the fair hair,’ Hussein went on regretfully, with a side-glance at Iris ; ‘ it’s a pity to kill her. It seems such a waste of good material. She might serve well to draw water and to cook *cous-cous*, and to prepare the house for the sons of the Faithful. Her face is pretty. I like her looks better even than Meriem’s.’

‘ Slay the men ; take the women alive, says the word of Allah. All but the woman

with the high heels. Lay her low in the dust, says the servant of the All-Powerful.'

Hussein smiled—a horrible, wistful smile. 'That's well,' he said, chuckling. 'I prefer her to Meriem.' And he followed her with a gloating look in his fierce black eyes till she faded out of sight down the long and narrow zigzag mule-path.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HELLENICA.

‘Do you know, Eustace,’ Blake said at breakfast in the tent next morning, ‘I’ve been devoting myself too exclusively of late to the mere figure. I must really go back to a little more landscape. These studies of mine of girls and young men—Meriem in particular—will be awfully useful to me when I get back to England. I mean to work ’em up, and make really good things of ’em for the Academy, some day. But they require the local landscape for background ; they require the landscape. Such essentially idyllic types of life are nothing at all without their natural setting of olive and pine, cactus and fan-palm. “The long

brook falling through the cloven ravine," and all that sort of thing's a necessary adjunct. I must go further afield, and keep up my details.'

Le Marchant smiled, for he knew in his own soul, already, what was coming. 'And where will you go?' he asked as innocently as he could.

'Why, over near St. Cloud, I think,' Vernon Blake replied, perusing the canvas ceiling; 'there are some jolly bits there. One dear little shrine in particular, on a tall hillside, all hung about with rags and pilgrims' offerings, took my fancy immensely the last time we were over there. And that skittish small Frenchwoman told me the other day, when we went to call upon her'—for they had made their peace, in the interval, with Madame l'Administratrice—'that if ever I happened to be painting over their way, it would give her and monsieur all the pleasure in the world if I'd drop in at the Fort to have a mouthful of luncheon.'

It's convenient having a place where one can get a feed, you know.' And he fiddled with his jack-knife, trying to look unconcerned and unconscious.

'Poor Meriem!' Le Marchant murmured with genuine regret, spreading some more tinned lobster on a large round sea-biscuit.

'Well, I never pretended I really cared for her,' Blake answered in the oblique oration. 'And this other girl, if it comes to that, is a real English lady, and worth ten thousand of her.'

'That's a matter of opinion,' Le Marchant said stoutly.

'She's too learned for me, though,' Blake went on, with some latent chagrin in his tone. 'Do you know what she said about Meriem, yesterday? She observed, quite casual-like, that Genseric and his Vandals—I think the gentleman's name was Genseric—must have left their mark deep on the soil and the people throughout all Mauritania. By Jove! I didn't know which way to look.

I never heard of Mr. Genseric in my life before, and I couldn't tell you where Mauritania was, or is, if my neck depended upon it. That's the sort of girl I admire, now, if you like. Genseric and his Vandals, she said, as pat as A B C—Genseric and his Vandals.'

'But, my dear fellow, it's in Gibbon, you know. There's nothing very wonderful in her having read the old familiar "Decline and Fall off the Rooshian Empire."'

'I never read Gibbon,' Blake responded with a stolid face.

'Well, it's in "Murray's Guide," then, if it comes to that,' Le Marchant retorted, without venturing to observe that a woman might have read far more than Blake, and yet by no means set up as a prodigy of learning. 'It seems to me far more surprising, as an intellectual feat, that Meriem, brought up in this out-of-the-way village, should have taught herself to read English, all of her own accord, than that Miss

Knyvett, aided and abetted and egged on from behind by a *posse comitatus* of Girton tutors, should have crammed herself up to be Third Classic.'

'Different men have different opinions,' Blake quoted gaily; 'and, for my part, opinions is not my taste. I willingly resign you my share in Meriem. She's all very well for a summer flirtation, I grant you—a man *must* amuse himself—but to compare her for one second to that heavenly apparition sent to be a moment's ornament, in the riding-habit and hat! Why, it makes me positively angry to hear you. She's a phantom of delight, that's what I call her. I'm off, Eustace. I shan't be back till six in the evening.'

He trudged across to St. Cloud on foot; and, being a prudent man, so he flattered himself inwardly, he called before beginning his work at the Fort, just to let Madame l'Administratrice know beforehand that he meant to specialise her general invitation,

and drop in to luncheon this particular noonday.

Madame l'Administratrice looked pettishly coquettish.

'While we were all by ourselves, monsieur,' she said, with a fetching little glance towards Iris, 'you never did us the honour of accepting our hospitality.'

Vernon Blake smiled a sheepish smile. He could be bold as brass before poor barefooted Meriem; but the Third Classic, that awesome English heiress, brought out at once all the instinctive shyness of his underlying nature.

'Why, I'm going to paint over here to-day,' he stammered out timidly, in his best Ollendorff; 'and you said, you know, whenever I came over, you'd do me the honour of allowing me to lunch here.'

'Oh, mayn't madame and I come out and watch you?' Iris asked with genuine interest and pleasure. 'But perhaps you don't like being watched. I've never seen a real

painter at work in my life, do you know; and after that sweet thing of yours in the Grosvenor last year, I should love to find out exactly how you do it.'

'I shall be only too flattered,' Blake answered, smiling, that being, in fact, the precise object with which he had come over there. Love at first sight was the name of his malady.

'And may I go too?' Mrs. Knyvett inquired, focussing the prominent feature full upon the painter with a benign smile.

'Oh, not for the world, dear,' Iris interposed earnestly. 'It's so chilly this morning, and the wind's from the mountains, and I should be afraid of my life it'd bring on your bronchitis.'

Blake heard this veto with lively satisfaction. He fancied from the tone it was not perhaps entirely dictated by filial solicitude. Besides, madame didn't know a single word of English, and was, therefore, admirably adapted (from the point of view of giddy

youth) for enacting with effect the part of the common or garden gooseberry.

They strolled out together to the point on the hillside where Blake had decided to select his background—a pretty little dell by a Kabyle road; and there the young artist, with those big gray eyes, set up his canvas on the easel, where Meriem, of course, as central figure, stood already painted-in with striking vigour. It was a graceful form, and Iris admired it with genuine admiration.

‘How beautifully you paint these people!’ she said, looking up at him. ‘You seem to have caught their spirit to the very life. Such *naïveté* and simplicity; the Kabyles all over.’

‘I’m glad you like it,’ Blake answered, blushing. ‘Praise from your lips is indeed commendation.’

Iris glanced timidly aside at madame. Half a dozen Kabyle boys had gathered, as was their wont, already round the

canvas to see the infidel stranger paint ; and the little Frenchwoman, having drawn a semicircular line with her parasol in the dust of the path round the base of the easel, was congenially engaged in rapping with the knobby top of the same weapon of offence the bare toes of any luckless urchin who ventured to transgress her prescribed limit. ‘ *Une occupation comme une autre !* ’ she said, looking up with a good-humoured and mischievous smile at Iris. ‘ *Il faut bien s’amuser. Et puis ça leur apprend le respect de l’autorité.* ’

‘ Would you like to look at my sketch-book ? ’ Blake said in English, handing it to the amiable chaperon as he spoke. Madame took it, and glanced over it carelessly. It was not in the least Parisian ; nothing piquant at all in it ; so she passed it on with a yawn and a sigh to Iris. Ten minutes later she was beginning to *s’ennuyer*, to prevent which misfortune she buried her face in close communion with a paper-

covered copy of Daudet's 'Sapho,' imported by post from Algiers yesterday.

So Iris and Blake, left to themselves, talked on for an hour uninterrupted. By that time madame, propped against a tree, had fallen asleep quietly over her Parisian story.

'How do you like it now?' Blake asked at last, standing off a foot or two, and surveying his own handicraft with not ungraceful complacency.

'It's just like a little idyl from Theocritus, Mr. Blake,' Iris cried admiringly. 'Doesn't your work often remind you while you're painting of Theocritus? It seems to me absolutely inspired in every detail by the true old *naïve* Dorian feeling.'

'I haven't read Theocritus,' Blake answered modestly, feeling bound to disclaim the honour thus thrust upon him. 'To tell you the truth, I don't read Latin at all, Miss Knyvett.'

'Oh, don't you?' Iris cried with a faint little

blush of sympathetic shame at his simple blunder. 'I'm sorry for that, for then you've never had the pleasure of reading the "Georgics;" and the "Georgics" to you would be like flowers to the bees—your native field, your predestined pabulum. You'd revel in the "Georgics," I'm quite sure, Mr. Blake, if you read Latin. And you don't read Greek, then, either, of course; for whoever reads Homer has first read Virgil. That's a pity, too, for you'd delight in Theocritus. The scent of these thymy southern hillsides blows through every line of his breezy idyls, as whiffs of the heather blow through Wordsworth's "Excursion," and the perfume of the may through some of Tennyson's English country pieces.'

'So Theocritus wrote in Greek, did he?' Blake answered, ill at ease, ruthlessly exposing his own hasty mistake, which Iris had endeavoured so gracefully to gloss over and yet prevent for the future. 'Then I

made a stupid ignorant blunder when I thought he was a Latin. Miss Knyvett,' and he paused with his brush upturned, 'you're a sight too clever for me to talk to.'

'Not clever,' Iris corrected; 'only well read. I've mugged it up out of books, that's all. Anybody can mug it all up if he'll only take the pains. I had to at Cambridge.'

'But what was that you said yesterday about Nausicaa?' Blake went on, still blushing. 'I wanted to ask you who Nausicaa was; and just then I was really afraid and ashamed to.'

'Oh, Nausicaa?' Iris answered with a little laugh. 'She's in the "Odyssey," you know; the daughter of Alcinous, King of Phæacia, and she goes with her maidens to wash linen by the seashore; and there she finds Odysseus thrown upon the coast; and 'then' — gliding gently over the dangerous ground with a faint blush, for even a Girton girl is still a woman—

‘she gives him dry things and takes him home in her father’s chariot to the Court of Phæacia.’

‘It sounds like good ballad poetry,’ Blake answered interested. ‘Worked up in the style of the “Earthly Paradise,” I should think it ought to make very graceful verse.’

‘I wish I were going to stop here longer,’ Iris said quite seriously, amused at his inverted way of looking at Homer, ‘and I’d teach you Greek. It’s a grand language . . . and I can’t bear to think you’ve never heard the bees hum in Theocritus.’

‘You’d find me a precious bad pupil, I’m afraid,’ Blake went on with a sigh, as he added a still deeper tinge of orange to the throat of the great Cretan mullein he was daintily painting. ‘I was always bad at anything like a language.’

Iris paused, admiring the exquisite depth of the colour in the gorge of the bell, and the masterly painting of the whole imperial blossom. Remembering the scraps of Ollen-

dorffian French she had already heard him stumble through with Madame l'Administratrice, she began to fear vaguely in her own soul that her new hero had by no means unduly underestimated his own very slender linguistic capabilities. She gazed at the canvas, and tried another tack.

‘After all,’ she said, with pensive head on one side appreciative, ‘why should I wish you to read Theocritus at all, when I see you *are* in all essentials a Theocritus already? What the Greek tried to say with words and rhythm, that you say for us here in visible images with form and pigment. The same grace, the same studied ease, the same southern rusticity, the same simple naturalness. Nothing about your art is anywhere affected.’ Her own thoughts hurried her on too far. ‘You have no need to go to school to the Greeks,’ she went on. ‘You, a poet-painter, have in yourself, to start with, those very ideas which we ordinary mortals strive to hammer

into our heads by hard practice through daily acquaintance with the masterpieces of literature.'

Blake looked back at her with his big eyes full of childish wonder. He hardly knew how to contain himself with surprise. Delicate flattery is dear to the soul of every one of us; sympathy, appreciation, encouragement in our art—though we don't often get them; but that *she*, the one woman whom he most dreaded and admired on earth, whom he had lain awake to dream of all last night, should thus condescend to put him, as it were, upon her own level, and to balance his gifts with hers, not wholly to his disadvantage—this, indeed, was more than he could have hoped or prayed for. And the best of it was, in a shamefaced way, in that back-corner of self-esteem which even the most modest of us keeps somewhere perdu at the far-end of his brain, he recognised himself with an inward blush

that all she said had a great deal of truth in it. He *was* a poetic painter by nature, and he felt instinctively the underlying kinship between work like his own and the best pastoral poetry. But Le Marchant had never told him that. Le Marchant had never casually remarked upon his brotherhood with the great idyllic poets. No one but she, that incomparable she, in her noble condescension, had ever yet beheld the whole genius that was in him.

‘You’re very kind,’ he said, one blush pervading him to the roots of his hair. ‘You somehow make me feel quite at home at once with you. Shall I confess now why I thought Theocritus wrote in Latin? I think I will. Because I know him only through Andrew Lang’s ballade, “Where breaks the blue Sicilian sea”—you remember? And Sicilians, I fancied, must surely have spoken Latin, because nowadays, I suppose, they speak Italian.’

‘I never read that piece,’ Iris answered unabashed.

‘Oh, let me repeat it then,’ Blake cried, enchanted to find he knew something she didn’t. Young love delights to drop into poetry; and he recited it all through with a sonorous voice to his listening companion.

Iris followed the flow of those dainty lines with deep attention. ‘It’s beautiful,’ she said as he finished; ‘simple and beautiful, like your own painting.’

They paused awhile; then Iris said once more, to change the subject, ‘How hot it is here! I’m quite thirsty. I should love some lemonade. My kingdom for a lemon!’

Blake dropped into poetry once again. The mood was on him:

“ Oh, for a draught of vintage that has been
Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth;
Tasting of Flora and the country green.
Dance, and Provençal song and sun-burnt mirth;
Oh, for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene!”

‘That’s pretty, too,’ Iris said, admiring. ‘And is that Andrew Lang also? Please tell it all to me.’

Blake started in surprise. ‘What, not know that!’ he cried. ‘Why, it’s Keats, of course; the Ode to the Nightingale. I thought, of course, you’d have read *that*. It’s a lovely thing. You must let me repeat it to you.’

Iris blushed again. ‘You’ll think me dreadfully ignorant, I’m afraid,’ she said apologetically. ‘I’ve had to work so hard at Greek and Latin the last few years, that I’m afraid I’ve rather neglected the English poets; while your mind seems to be just saturated with them. I wish I’d read them as much as you have.’

Young love is always frankly self-conscious. ‘How quickly a woman finds out all that’s in one!’ he cried, delighted; ‘so much faster than a man. I’ve lived with Le Marchant six months in a tent, and yet, except for a certain manual deftness in

painting pictures, I don't believe he's ever found out there's anything in me.'

Iris dropped her pretty eyelashes with a demure droop—for all the world like any ordinary girl who has *not* been to Cambridge.

'Mr. Le Marchant's a mere man of science,' she said slowly. 'Perhaps . . . you and I . . . have more in common.'

Vernon Blake tramped back to the tent that night, up the steep path, with that painful malady strong upon him. It made his heart go thump, thump, thump. And as he tramped, he said to himself a hundred times over in an ecstasy of delight, 'Here, by God's grace, is the one maid for me,' as Geraint said when he first saw Enid.

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CHAPTER XXV.

THE CLAIMANT'S CASE COLLAPSES.

FOR the next fortnight, Vernon Blake's single-hearted devotion to landscape was really nothing short of exemplary. The figure, at least as a subject for artistic study, seemed suddenly to have lost for him all interest or attraction. He tramped it over to St. Cloud every morning regularly, across that weary pass, and painted away at the background of his big picture with a steadiness of aim and forgetfulness of fatigue that would have deserved the highest commendation—in an older man. Almost every morning, too, by some strange coincidence, Iris somehow happened to be passing casually, and to look, for a few minutes at least as

she passed, at the progress of the handsome young painter's work.

One would almost have fancied they both did it on purpose, were such suspicions possible about a Third Classic. But Girton girls, of course, like Cæsar's wife, are above suspicion.

'Don't you think, perhaps, he's a trifle dangerous, Tom?' Mrs. Knyvett asked more than once of her astute brother.

And the eminent Q.C., who flattered himself he had a keen nose for the trail of a fortune-hunter, answered off-hand, 'No, no, Amelia; not he. He's an innocent, ignorant young man, the painter. Not at all the sort of person ever likely to fall in love with a girl like Iris; and certainly not at all the sort of person a girl like Iris is ever the least likely to fall in love with. He doesn't know a quarter enough for *her*, bless you! It's that clever Le Marchant fellow that we've got to steer clear of.'

In which confident prediction Uncle Tom

was so fully justified by the facts of the case that before the first fortnight was well over Iris caught herself looking out with a beating heart every morning from her windows in the Fort, to see if the painter, with his easel on his back, was trudging down the hill ; and Vernon Blake on his side caught himself, with a similar flutter under his waistcoat watch-pocket, waiting for the slightest rustle of a certain dainty morning-dress against the lentisk bushes of the hedge, as he stood and painted with trembling fingers at that interminable background.

Iris saw a great deal all these days of Meriem also ; for Uncle Tom had now procured the philological services of a one-eyed Maltese—official interpreter to the Commune of St. Cloud—of whose aid in speaking the Kabyle tongue he availed himself freely in his legal inquiries ; and though Iris herself was henceforth strictly excluded from these severe interviews as a dangerous personage to her own cause, she generally rode across

with her uncle to the Beni-Merzoug mountain, and sat among the bare rocks outside, chatting with Meriem, while the great Q.C., the Amine, and the Kabyles generally, were endeavouring to arrive, by question and answer, though the medium of the one-eyed Maltese's English, at some possible mode of understanding one another's respective ideas, Oriental or Western.

On one such occasion Uncle Tom came over in high glee, primed for the final inquiry of all, to which his careful research among the archives of St. Cloud had now ultimately narrowed itself. He had no doubt by this time in his own mind that a good deal of the Claimant's story was true—that Clarence Knyvett, after enlisting at Toulon as Joseph Leboutillier, had really run away from the Third Chasseurs, out of pique or Quixotism, and taken refuge among the Kabyles under the name of Yusuf. He had discovered further, from the *Actes de l'État Civil* at St. Cloud, that the fugitive

had survived his brother Alexander by several months, and therefore, in accordance with the blundering terms of the old Admiral's will, possessed the power of bequeathing the family property to whomever he chose, provided only he died in the position of a father to lawful issue, by English usage recognised as such, and then only. Hence, the one point Uncle Tom had still to investigate was the very simple one whether Clarence Knyvett's marriage with Halima, Meriem's mother, was in the eyes of the Probate and Divorce Division a true wedlock or a purely polygamous and non-Christian union. And that he could prove this sole remaining point to his own satisfaction he had very little doubt indeed. The proof, to be sure, would not satisfy Iris's extreme views as to Aristotelian equity; but it would amply satisfy the scruples of an English judge; and that was quite enough for Uncle Tom. The great Blackstone had pronounced the union a meretri-

cious one. Uncle Tom didn't for a moment doubt that Iris herself could be persuaded in the end to agree with the great Blackstone on the legal issue, to compromise Meriem's shadowy claims for some small annuity, and to enjoy her own good and undoubted title to the estate without further dreams of a Quixotic and unpractical natural justice.

On this particular morning, therefore, Uncle Tom sat under the open corridor of the Amine's cottage, endeavouring for the tenth time at least to cross-examine, in his familiar Chancery Lane style, these very unpromising and incomprehensible witnesses.

It was hard, indeed, to drag anything out of them; their Oriental imagery clouded from the eminent Q.C.'s Occidental mind their underlying meaning. But at last Uncle Tom had begun to discover a right mode of approach, and to pin the Amine down, step by step, to something like a consistent statement of plain history.

‘Ask him,’ Uncle Tom remarked to the interpreter, with severe emphasis, ‘whether he was present himself on the particular occasion when his sister Halima, or whatever else her outlandish name may be, was married to the man they called Yusuf.’

‘He says, of course he was,’ the one-eyed Maltese responded cheerfully, as the Amine, with innumerable nods and gestures, expressed his assent volubly in many guttural notes to the question proposed to him.

‘Ask him once more,’ Uncle Tom continued, with an austere countenance, ‘if there was any written contract of marriage.’

‘He says, Allah is great, and it is not the custom with the sons of the Kabyles,’ the interpreter replied, again translating, with his one eye fixed firmly on the barrister’s face.

‘Then what was the ceremony performed at the wedding?’ Uncle Tom went on, with malicious joy.

‘He says, the All-Merciful was pleased

to prosper him ; he got twenty francs and a French Government rifle for her,' the interpreter replied, with his gravest expression.

Uncle Tom was delighted, though he feigned surprise, and with difficulty repressed a triumphant smile. Nothing could be more beautifully barbaric than this. Twenty francs and a Government rifle ! If ever the case should come into an English Court, which wasn't likely, the learned judge, Uncle Tom felt certain, would dismiss Miss Meriem at once, with costs, on the mere strength of that one feeble and fatuous admission.

' But the ceremony ! ' Uncle Tom objected, with a severe face, trying to look shocked. ' The religious sanction ? The obligation or bond ? The *nexus matrimonii* ? They must surely have something among these rude tribes in the nature of a wedding. They don't manage the matter as the fowls of the air would, do they, surely ? '

' He says, a man who knows how to read

Arabic recites the first and fourth chapters of the Koran,' the interpreter replied, 'and then the husband pays the contract price, and they eat a dish of *cous-cous* together, and the parties thenceforth are considered married.'

Uncle Tom rubbed his hands together gaily. '*Confarreatio*!' he murmured to himself. 'Heathen *confarreatio*, not Christian marriage.—And that was all that took place in this case?' he asked aloud, with considerable unction.

'Oh no,' the interpreter replied, after consulting his principal; 'there was more than that, the Amine remarks; much feasting and dancing took place in the house, and quantities of figs and of *cous-cous* were eaten.'

'But there was no sort of wedding or marriage ceremony before the French authorities?' Uncle Tom insisted; 'no going before the priest or the Maire, for example, or anybody of that sort?'

'The Amine says, do you take him for a

dog?' the interpreter answered, with an unmoved face. 'Was his sister a Christian, that she should do these things? Have not all his people been reckoned among the stanchest of the Faithful since the beginning of time, and is not he himself lineally descended from the Glory of Islam, the Star of the Atlas, the holy saint Sidi Mohammed of the Djurjura?'

Uncle Tom was almost satisfied now, but he thought it well to ask just one more question before he considered the point as finally settled.

'Ask the man,' he said once more, with his suavest voice, to make security doubly sure, 'whether polygamy is lawful among his countrymen, the Kabyles.'

'The Amine replies, unhappily his people are too poor to be able to afford more than one wife apiece,' the interpreter answered. 'The Arabs, who are richer, have often more. Herds of camels and many wives are theirs. But the law of the Prophet is alike

for all. There is but one Koran for Arab or Kabyle. Let not the Faithful set themselves up against the customs of Islam. In common with all other true Moslems, the Kabyles may have four wives apiece, if they choose, after the example of the ever-blessed Prophet Mohammed, and the glorious and victorious Caliph Omar.'

Uncle Tom chuckled audibly to himself at the naïve reply. The learned judge would know very well how to deal with a so-called marriage of *that* sort. A polygamous union, of no legal value! The case was practically closed now. The Claimant was *not* Clarence Knyvett's lawful heir, according to the requirements of English law. Uncle Tom had vindicated the sanctity of Christian wedlock. He had confounded the wiles of that artful Le Marchant. He felt his bosom swell with an honest pride. Twenty francs and a Government rifle, indeed! The Claimant's cause had collapsed utterly.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO MAIDENS.

OUTSIDE, meanwhile, upon the rocks under the gnarled old olives on the slope, Meriem and Iris sat and talked hard by, like two sisters who had lived with one another for a whole lifetime. Bare-footed, one, and a Girton girl, the other, that fortnight had brought them very close together. It seemed to Meriem as if for the first time in all her life she had found a girl friend to whom she could confide what was innermost and most profoundly sacred within her.

‘I suppose, Iris,’ she said, in her simple, childlike way, peeping out from her robe with half-coquettish shyness, ‘the English

part of me has only just begun quite lately to awaken. Before Vernon and Eustace came here to camp, I had never seen any English people at all, you see, except only Yusuf.'

'Uncle Clarence, you mean,' Iris suggested, half starting.

'He was Yusuf to me while he lived,' Meriem answered, with a grave and serious look, taking her new friend's hand in her own, as was her wont; 'and he shall be Yusuf to me always as long as I live, whatever his English people may have called him. Well, you see, dear, till Vernon and Eustace came to camp here, I hardly remembered or understood anything much of what Yusuf had told me. My English even was just a little girl's, I suppose; at least, it was a great deal simpler and scantier than what I speak now; for when Yusuf died I was only a child, and all I knew was so vague and childish.'

'But how old are you now, Meriem?' her

cousin asked, looking hard at her strong fair face, with no little wonderment. 'It isn't so long since Uncle Clarence's death. You can't have been so very childish then, you know.'

'I'm sixteen now,' Meriem answered, after a short attempt to recollect exactly. 'So I must have been a little over twelve when Yusuf died, you see.'

Iris started.

'No more than sixteen!' she cried. 'Why, Meriem, you look as old as I, and I'm twenty-three my next birthday.'

'But in the south,' Meriem said, 'I've always heard we girls grow to be women a great deal earlier than in colder countries. I suppose that's the Kabyle half of my nature; though I seem to feel, since Vernon and you came, I'm a great deal more English than Kabyle at bottom. I seem to get so much nearer to Vernon and you than I ever could get to Ahmed or to Ayesha.'

‘Then you’ve learnt to speak English much better of late?’ Iris asked musingly.

‘Oh yes,’ Meriem answered; ‘ever so much better. I’ve learnt to express myself so much more easily. Since Vernon came, he and I have been talking together almost all the time. And I’ve learned to read English too, you see; that’s taught me a great many words and ideas I hadn’t got in my head before. It seems as if I learnt more quickly than was possible. Not at all like learning to read the Koran. More like remembering, almost, than learning.’

Love is a most successful teacher of languages.

‘I expect,’ Iris suggested, after a moment’s thought, ‘your English nature had been growing up slowly, though never developing, for want of opportunity; and when these two young men came, and you had English companionship, it burst out at once, like a dormant faculty, into full activity.’

‘I think so,’ Meriem answered, catching at once at the kernel of her meaning, though some of the words that enveloped it were still unfamiliar to her. ‘I think I must have grown like a flower does, you know, before it opens, and the moment the right time for unfolding arrived, I must have opened naturally when the sunshine fell upon me.’

‘What sunshine?’ Iris asked, with a quiet smile.

Meriem had it in her heart to answer simply and truthfully, ‘Vernon’s;’ but a certain strange shyness she had never felt before in her life restrained her somehow, and she answered instead, quite prettily:

‘Yours, Iris.’

The Third Classic leant forward, pleased at the compliment, and laid her white hand on Meriem’s neck caressingly. As she did so, she touched the little box locket that Meriem wore round her throat always. The girl drew back with a half-startled look.

‘Don’t touch it!’ she cried. ‘You mustn’t take that off. It was Yusuf himself who hung that charm there, and he told me I must never, never let anyone except myself handle it.’

Iris withdrew her caressing fingers, half hurt at the rebuff.

‘I see all you Kabyle girls wear them,’ she said, less cordially. ‘What is there in them?’

‘Some of them have a little red hand for luck,’ Meriem answered, half blushing, with ingenuous shame, ‘and some have the bone of a great saint, or a white rag of his blessed clothing, and some have charms against the evil-eye, and some have a verse from the holy Koran.’

‘But what’s in yours?’ Iris persisted once more.

‘I don’t know,’ Meriem answered. ‘I’ve never looked. It was Yusuf who hung it there. He told me to keep it very carefully.’

‘But you ought to look, I think,’ Iris went on, with insistence. ‘Do let me take it off just once to see! Perhaps it may be something very important.’

Meriem drew back with the same startled and terrified look as before.

‘Oh, don’t touch it, Iris; don’t touch it!’ she cried. ‘Why, I wouldn’t let even Vernon himself touch it.’

It was Iris’s turn to start back now. Vernon, Vernon, always Vernon! A shade of displeasure passed for a moment over her bright face.

‘You seem very fond of Mr. Blake,’ she said chillily. ‘And why do you always call him Vernon?’

‘He told me to,’ Meriem answered, looking up into her pretty English cousin’s eyes with vague wonder and hesitancy. ‘He said it was the right way to call him in English.’

‘Not for a girl,’ Iris objected decidedly. ‘Girls don’t call men by their names like

that. I call him "Mr. Blake," don't you notice, Meriem?

'Well, I called him Blake, too, at first,' Meriem went on, much puzzled at this strange discrepancy between her teachers; 'and Eustace and he laughed at me for doing it. They told me only men did so in England. A woman ought to call him by the name he's got for being a Christian—Vernon.'

'By his Christian name!' Iris cried disapprovingly. 'Oh no, Meriem; not unless—unless they're awfully intimate and at home together. Only, you know, when they've known one another ever so long, and like one another, oh—just immensely!'

'Well, I like Vernon just immensely,' Meriem answered, smiling.

'Why?' Iris asked with sharp decision.

'Who can tell? Because he paints and talks so beautifully, I suppose,' Meriem replied evasively.

A strange doubt rose, vague and unde-

fined, in Iris's mind. Till that moment, the terrible thought had never even occurred to her. She knew that Vernon Blake had constantly painted the beautiful Kabyle girl, and had reproduced her faultless form in every attitude of that simple idyllic mountain life with brush and with pencil; but it had never struck her as possible, any more than it had struck Vernon Blake himself, that anything more serious than mere artistic admiration could enter into his feelings towards the fair barbarian. Iris was immensely taken with Meriem in her own way; the novelty and freshness of the situation interested and amused her. She had greeted her half-wild Mahommedan cousin sympathetically, with a cousinly frankness, and had forgotten, as far as a woman can forget, the great gulf fixed for ever between them. But the gulf was vaguely there in the background all the time, for all that. Meriem was to Iris a charming and interesting and attractive

savage, but a savage still at bottom, in spite of everything. She could never believe that Vernon Blake, that poetic soul, that exquisite artist, as she herself had found him in their brief intercourse, could dream of throwing himself away for life upon a mere graceful and beautiful wild creature like Meriem.

And more than that, far, Iris felt at that moment. The human heart (at twenty-three) is a most plastic object. She had known Vernon Blake for a fortnight only, but she woke up all at once at those stray words of Meriem's to a vivid consciousness that henceforth he was indeed a part of her life, a factor in her history she could never again get rid of, for good or for evil. From the very first time she ever saw him, it had been Vernon Blake all day and all night with her. Vernon Blake had echoed in her brain and reverberated through her being. If not love at first sight on her side, as on his, it was at any rate interest—a profound

interest, an indefinable charm, an irresistible attraction.

‘Do you love him, Meriem?’ she asked suddenly.

Meriem looked back at her with perfect frankness. To the Kabyle girls of her village she would never have said a single word on that sacred subject. She could never have confided to them her love for a stranger, and that stranger an infidel. But Iris, as she said, like Vernon himself, had roused the half-awakened English side of her nature. To Iris she felt she could confide everything, as an English girl confides in her bosom friend, freely and unservedly. She glanced, with a certain amount of shyness, but with no pretence at concealment, at her dainty little cousin, as she answered simply :

‘I love him, Iris, as I never could have loved one of our own people.’

‘And does *he* love *you*?’ Iris asked, with a spasm.

Meriem's brow puckered up a little.

'I don't know,' she said, in a hesitating voice, pulling grasses from the crannies of the rock as she spoke. 'I can't make quite sure. You see, Iris, I don't understand your English ways; and though I've been reading English novels and trying to understand them, I'm not so certain that I've really quite understood it all yet. Sometimes I think he does love me, because he talks so beautifully to me, and takes my face between his hands—like this, you know; and sometimes, when he gets so flippant and strange, and talks such nonsense, I think he doesn't really care one bit for me, but only just wants to amuse himself a little—like what they call flirting in the English novels. Kabyles don't flirt; we don't understand it. The last fortnight, especially, he's been often so. He's hardly taken any notice at all these days of me. . . . But then, you see, he says he's done quite enough figures now, and he wants to

go on painting at what he calls the background.'

Iris looked hard at her with a vague misgiving.

'Meriem,' she said, gasping, 'has he . . . has he ever said very much—you know how—to you?'

Meriem thought deeply for a moment how to express her ideas before she spoke. Then she answered slowly, with great difficulty:

'I think he's talked to me . . . well, it's so awfully hard for me to say, of course, because our Kabyle men don't make love, you know, as you do in England; they buy us and pay for us; it's a matter of bargaining, like one does at market . . . but I think, Iris, he's often talked to me . . . the way they make love in the English novels.'

'And taken your face in his hands—so?' Iris went on, trembling, and holding Meriem's beautiful, shapely head between her palms as she spoke.

‘Yes, just so, Iris,’ Meriem answered, half whispering. Her face was like a red rose now. ‘Do you think . . . do you think, dear, that means anything?’

The English girl’s heart beat hard but slow, with long leaps and throbs, as she asked again faintly, ‘And kissed you, Meriem?’

‘Yes,’ Meriem answered, in the same soft voice, getting frightened now. ‘Was it wrong of me, Iris? . . . I was afraid it was wrong. I told him I thought so—that he oughtn’t to do it. But he only laughed at me and said, “Oh no, people always kissed like that in England.” Out here, in Kabylie, you know, men never kiss a girl, of course—not a nice girl, I mean—till they’ve bought her and paid for her, and the Taleb has read a chapter of the Koran over them. But in England, Vernon said it wasn’t like that; that you didn’t think it at all wrong; and in the English novels—for I looked on purpose—I saw that all the

young men and girls kissed one another quite freely when . . . when they were really and truly fond of one another. So I thought Vernon must be really and truly very fond of me, as he kissed me so often. Was it awfully wrong of me, Iris? I couldn't ask Fatma or Ayesha, you see, because they wouldn't know; and if it was wrong, I didn't really mean it.'

'No, not wrong, dear,' Iris answered, with a spasmodic gulp; 'but—but—oh, Meriem!' And she broke down suddenly, and burst at once into a flood of tears.

Her heart was full almost to bursting. If for one short moment she thought harshly of Meriem, who could blame her? It was surely natural. Was this barefooted Kabyle girl, a mere waif of the mountains, to take away from her at one fell swoop—and of just right, too—everything on earth she most prized and cherished? A month ago, she had never seen Sidi Aia. To-day, she was willing to give up Sidi Aia to

Meriem—it was Meriem's own. Had she not indeed come over to Algeria for that very purpose? A fortnight ago she had never seen Vernon Blake. To-day she could not give up her painter to Meriem without tearing at the very roots and fibres of her heart. Till then, she had never known how deep he had struck. She felt at that moment how profoundly she loved him.

Meriem, gazing at her in blank surprise, read at once the secret the Englishwoman had never yet spoken.

‘Oh, Iris,’ the mountain-bred girl exclaimed, flinging herself on her unconscious rival's neck, and bursting in her turn into a flood of hot tears, ‘I didn't know it! I didn't suspect it! If I had, I would never have spoken to you so. I thought he admired you very much indeed—who could help admiring you? But I didn't think—I didn't think—I didn't think you loved him!’

‘Hush!’ Iris cried, looking round her in alarm. ‘I never said so, Meriem. I never, never, never said so. Even to myself, I never once said so.’

‘Has he told you he loves you?’ Meriem cried, in suspense.

‘No ; he has never *told* me,’ Iris answered, through her tears. ‘But—you know how it is ; he’s let me feel, I suppose—you understand how—not by what he said, or even looked or did, but by what he didn’t say, or look, or do, Meriem.’

The Kabyle girl rose, and gazed down upon the graceful and delicate English lady very compassionately. Her own soul was all seething within her.

‘Iris,’ she said slowly, with deep determination, ‘you have nothing to cry for. Don’t break your heart as he’s broken mine. He never cared in the least for *me*. It was all empty. I know it now. I see it at last. He was only amusing himself!’

‘Then he had no right to break your

heart, dear,' the Englishwoman answered, clinging hard to her hand. 'He had no right to flirt with you ; he had no right to kiss you. I can see how deep the wound has gone. He must marry you, Meriem. You're rich, and he must marry you.'

In her passion of self-abnegation, she would give up all. Sidi Aia, and the property, and Vernon Blake, were Meriem's.

'I don't want the money,' Meriem answered low, her eyes now dry, and her bosom panting ; 'but I did want—I did want Vernon.'

'You shall have him,' Iris repeated. 'He must marry you. I'll make him.'

Meriem flung herself at her cousin's feet once more, and raising the hem of her dress to her lips, as she had done on the very first morning they met, she cried out earnestly :

'Oh, Iris, you must take him ! When I look at you, and think that such a girl as you are willing to marry him, I wonder I

was bold enough ever to dream he could look for a moment at a poor creature like me. Iris—Iris, I see it all now as clear as day. I tried for awhile to persuade myself he might, perhaps, really love me. But I know the truth now ; and the truth has crushed me. He never, never, never cared at all, in his heart, for me.'

'Then why did he kiss you?' Iris cried out fiercely. 'Why did he hold your face so in his hands? Why did he make love to you, and talk to you beautifully? If he didn't mean it, he was using you cruelly, and he shall never marry *me*, though he asked me on his knees, after acting like that. I shall never take him away from any other woman, who has so much better a claim on him than ever I could have.'

Meriem looked down at her own bare feet—that patent symbol of her low estate—in shame and mortification.

'I was mad,' she said, glancing from her own coarse haik to Iris's exquisitely-made

London dress, 'to dream that Vernon could ever think of *me*, such a girl as I am ! I've broken the dream for ever now. I shall crush it down deep in my heart, Iris. For his own sake, even, I'd never clog him with myself. He shall marry you ; he shall marry you ; I shall make him marry you.'

'It's a trial of strength between us, then,' Iris cried, in her passion of self-denial. 'He was yours first. He shall be yours for ever.'

'He was never mine,' Meriem answered sadly. 'He shall be yours for ever, as he has been, I know now, in my heart of hearts, from the very first moment he ever saw you.'

When Uncle Tom emerged from the Amine's cottage, two minutes later, he saw those two girls, as he expressed it himself to Mrs. Knyvett the same afternoon, kissing and crying under a big olive-tree, and declaring they loved each other dearer than

ever, and behaving for all the world before the eye of the sun like a couple of babies

But as Uncle Tom and Iris rode away towards St. Cloud once more, in varying moods (for Uncle Tom was elated at the pricking of this bubble) Hussein and Ahmed leaned up against a wall, and puffing slowly at their native cigarettes, watched the hated infidels well out of the village.

‘She’s pretty, the Christian girl,’ Ahmed said with a smile to his former foe and rival, Hussein, still toying with his dagger, ‘and very like Meriem, though a great deal more beautiful. It’s a pity she should be thrown away upon a mere infidel.’

‘Ay,’ Hussein answered, with a generous wave of the hand towards the bidder he had displaced. ‘Pretty she is, and fit for a Moslem. You may take Meriem yourself if you like, now, Ahmed. When Allah wills, I shall have the Christian woman.’

And that night, alone in her own room, Meriem, sitting by the dim light of a very Roman-looking earthenware lamp, filled with olive-oil and a floating wick, laid her hand dubiously on the charm round her neck, and then, with a sudden uncontrollable impulse, unfastening its clasp for the first time in her life . . . opened the spring lid, and looked gravely inside it.

What she saw there she told to no one ; but it altered the whole tenor of her life thenceforward.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A HARD WRENCH.

To Uncle Tom's Lincoln's Inn intelligence, the settlement of the point that Clarence Knyvett's so-called marriage with the late lamented Halima, deceased, was no marriage at all by English law, had closed the episode of their visit to Algeria. So far as he was concerned, that loyal son of the British Bar, true lawyer to the core, was prepared forthwith to return to the classic shades of Old Square, leaving bare-legged Miss Meriem and her Paynim friends to their own devices thenceforth and for ever. To be sure, he would have favourably entertained any proposal from Iris to pension off her Uncle Clarence's alleged daughter with

a modest pension of the most unassuming character. That small moral claim he fully admitted. A man's flesh and blood may be said, in a certain sort of merely human way, to be more or less related to him. But that the girl had the slightest legal right to a single stiver of Sir Arthur's property—pooh, pooh! the notion was too utterly ridiculous to be seriously considered by a judicial mind for half a minute. So he straightway proposed an immediate return to his native land before Iris could involve herself any further in this foolish intimacy with a half-savage, left-handed Mahomedan cousin.

The Third Classic, however, to Uncle Tom's supreme disgust, refused to see matters in the same simple and legally-polarized light. The law, she said, in her irreverent fashion, as they conversed with animation that evening at the Fort, might declare Uncle Clarence was no relation at all to his own daughter till all was blue.

She, for her part, defied the judges, and insisted upon taking a more natural biological view of the question. Coleridge, C.J., might talk himself black in the face to prove the contrary, and she wouldn't believe him. She maintained with obstinacy, in spite of Blackstone, the perverse opinion that father and child are more or less remotely connected by nature with one another, and that all the law and all the lawyers in England could never make them into strangers in blood, whatever they did to them. Besides, she wanted to stop and see more of Meriem. She wanted to decide in her own mind what must be done about the matter of the inheritance.

She did not add to Uncle Tom—perhaps she did not add even to herself—that she wanted also to consider what must be done about Vernon Blake, and how she was to tear away her own poor little heart from that too attractive and cohesive painter.

‘Madame will be tired of us,’ Uncle Tom

suggested, as a last resort. 'She can hardly mean to take us all in as lodgers at nothing a week for an indefinite period.'

But madame, who just caught at the meaning of his sentence as he let it drop, interposed with something more than mere French politeness to assure her dear friends she would be delighted for her part to put them up on those terms for ever and ever. And so, in truth, she would no doubt have been; for the little woman loved society; and in this dull place, *que voulez-vous, monsieur?* Must one die of *ennui*?

So Uncle Tom in the end retired, worsted, as he always did from an encounter with Iris. Those persistent Knyvetts, with their sentiments and emotions, were invariably too much for his common-sense legalism. They could twist him round their little fingers, as he himself could twist and turn an unwilling witness. His very side-issues broke down hopelessly. If Mrs. Knyvett's

bronchitis, as Iris averred, really made it impossible to return at this time of year from a warm climate to the fogs of England, why couldn't they, at least, retire upon their own snug and comfortable villa at Algiers, till Amelia was well again?

But Iris said *no*, with her pretty little foot and the family emphasis, and Uncle Tom, squashed flat under the weight of her crushing negative, was forced to submit to that imperative gesture. Iris would never leave Grande Kabylie, she declared, till she'd settled the two subjects that now lived most of all in her mind—Meriem's fortune and Meriem's love-affair. Meriem must take it all—all—all from her. Meriem must have Uncle Arthur's fortune Meriem must marry that handsome painter.

In those two firm resolves, Iris sobbed herself wearily to sleep with self-righteous pride that night in her own bedroom at the Fort at St. Cloud. The fortune, indeed,

she could give up readily; but not the painter—no, not the painter.

Yet her pretty eyes were none the redder for her tears, when she sallied forth from the Fort next morning, with madame and the faithful officer of the Génie, and turned her steps in vague expectation towards the spot where Blake was still so ardently displaying his practical devotion to landscape backgrounds.

The painter was there, as madame had expected; for madame, all French though she was in her ideas of the proprieties, yet entered with zest into this romantic little episode of English love-making, the first she had ever seen outside the yellow covers of a translated novel.

‘I find that charming,’ she said, in an undertone, to her friend the officer; ‘we have nothing like it, *pour le bon motif, du moins*, on our side of the Channel. There is in it the element of free choice, of romance, of individual preference, and yet

it's all so innocent, oh, *mon Dieu, de l'innocence! Tandis que chez nous autres,*' and she broke off, sighing.

For she herself had been married at eighteen, to an eligible person of the same fortune, by mutual arrangement between her own family and M. l'Administrateur's.

Her poor little faded rags of romance had all come afterwards; and innocence was not precisely the exact attribute that delighted the soul of the officer of the Génie.

They sat down and criticised Blake's picture for awhile; then madame and her slave wandered off discursively into gossip of the Fort and the surrounding colony. Had monsieur seen the new Commandant's wife at the next post? What was her probable age, allowing for paint? And was she really so very pretty?

'Pretty! yes, *je vous l'accorde*, pretty. But that was all. A most sad affair. She hadn't the sou. Her husband had married

her *par pure dépravation* ; *je vous assure, madame, par pure dépravation.*'

Madame laughed, and raised her pencilled eyebrows. 'That was wrong, she said ; extremely wrong—and at such a crisis. A French official should be married in these days—married, of course, because it was necessary he should be doubly rich ; he must sustain the dignity of France among strangers ; but to marry *sans le sou*, that, for example, in madame's opinion, was sheer wickedness.

Vernon Blake lifted his eyes timidly from his canvas as she spoke, and caught Iris's. He couldn't forbear a meaning smile. The whole point of view was so thoroughly un-English. Iris dropped her own modest eyelids in return. The mute little pantomime was not thrown away on madame's keen glance.

'*J'ai passé par là,*' she thought to herself good-humouredly ; for she, too, had been in Arcadia. And besides, she was not

averse, in her present humour, to a quiet *tête-à-tête* herself, with the officer of the Génie.

‘Come on, *mon ami*,’ she cried of a sudden to her companion, in a very low tone, seizing his arm spasmodically. ‘These two have affairs of their own to settle. Let us not derange them. Let us admire the landscape.’ And they admired the landscape on their own account, a hundred yards off, round the corner of the rock, with that other element of individual preference thrown in, which, though not so guileless, is more peculiarly charming to the French idiosyncrasy.

‘What a funny way of looking at it!’ Iris said, with a smile, as they found themselves alone, with her heart beating hard; ‘so very different from our English ideas, you know! With us, of course, it seems quite natural a man should marry a penniless girl, and work hard for her, and try to make her happy. We think it wrong to

marry for money. But they both seemed to think, on the contrary, it was almost wicked for a man to marry a girl who had nothing.'

Vernon Blake's breath came and went in gasps.

'Yes,' he said slowly, pretending to fiddle with his brush at a painted leaf in the foreground as he spoke. 'I think, myself, I should much prefer the girl I wished to marry should have nothing of her own. I should like to spend my life, as you say, in working hard for her, and if ever I attained to wealth and fame and honour and dignity, to lay everything I'd earned as an offering at her feet, if only she'd accept it. . . . I think it's more manly and more natural so. The man should labour and slave for the woman. . . . But suppose, Miss Knyvett, a man were by chance to light some day upon a woman whom he could love, whom he could admire, whom he could adore, whom he

could die for—a woman towards whom he could look up with profound reverence—a woman whom he felt at once immeasurably his superior and yet, in other ways, his helpmeet and his counterpart—a woman to whom he could give, as Shelley says, the worship the soul lifts above, and the heavens reject not—suppose a man were to meet such a woman as that, whom on all other grounds he would wish, if he dared, to make his wife, and, as fate would have it, he happened to be poor, and she happened to be rich,' he looked at her appealingly, 'do you think do you think in such a case it would be quite wrong of him, taking into consideration how much they might happen to have in common (as you yourself suggested the other day)——' and he broke off suddenly. Iris's face was crimson now. She looked down, and answered nothing. He longed in his heart to stoop forward and kiss her.

But Iris felt a sudden storm convulse her

bosom. As the painter spoke, his words thrilled her. She knew he loved her—she knew she loved him. But he was Meriem's first. She must give him up, against her will, to Meriem.

Blake paused for a minute, and watched her silently. Then he spoke once more.

'Don't you think, too,' he said, longing for some little word of encouragement before he dared to go on, 'that in such a case a man would often shrink sensitively from asking the girl he loved, for fear his motives might be cruelly misconstrued?'

With a terrible effort, Iris did what she thought right.

'I don't think my cousin Meriem would misconstrue your motives,' she answered slowly, pretending to misunderstand his plain meaning. 'Of course she'll be rich when she comes in to Uncle Arthur's money, as I mean she shall do; but she was not rich when . . . when you first paid attentions to her; and she could hardly

think, under such circumstances, you meant to ask her for anything except her own sake.'

The painter drew back with a shock of surprise.

'Miss Knyvett,' he cried, in a pained voice, 'you're playing with me! You're teasing me! You're intentionally shutting your eyes to what I mean. At such a moment, it isn't right or kind of you. You can't seriously think I'm in love with Meriem.' And he seized her hand in his own, and held it violently.

Iris struggled hard to release it, but in vain.

'Let go my hand!' she said at last in an angry, authoritative tone; and Blake, surprised, let it go instantly, in answer to that imperious Knyvett voice. Her lips trembled, but she nerved herself up and said her say, straight out, for all that. 'I don't know why not,' she answered evasively. 'Meriem's beautiful; Meriem's

rich ; Meriem's an heiress in her own right ; Meriem's my uncle Clarence's daughter ; I don't know why any man shouldn't be proud and pleased to marry Meriem.'

' And after I've seen *you*, Iris ?'

He said it boldly. He said it softly. He called her by her name. He was not afraid to do it. In spite of herself, in spite of her conscience, in spite of her stern sense of duty to Meriem, Iris felt a sudden thrill of unwonted joy course down her spine as she heard him call her so. It was sweet to have won the heart of that beautiful creator of beautiful images, come what might of it. Sweet to have won it, if only for a day. Though she must give him up to Meriem—for he was Meriem's first—she didn't attempt to conceal from herself the delicious fact that she loved to know she had gained his love. As he stood there, appealing, with his two hands clasped, their fingers intertwining close in one another, he looked as grand and as fair as a young Greek god.

She was glad in her soul to know he loved her.

But she crushed it all down with unconquerable force. She was a Knyvett born; no weakness for her, even where a woman's heart was concerned. She looked back at him coldly, though those quivering lips belied her words.

‘Meriem told me all last night,’ she answered, with a pang. ‘You made love to her long before ever I came here. You made love to her when she was still poor and a nobody. You must marry her now she’s a rich lady, and Uncle Arthur’s heiress; for it’s I, after all, who am poor and a nobody, you see, nowadays.’

Vernon Blake’s heart gave a great bound.

‘I’m glad of that, Iris,’ he cried, still more boldly, with a burst of delight, ‘for then you’ll know it’s *you* I ask and want; like Lord Ronald with Lady Clare, you, and you only.’

It was hard on poor Iris, undeniably

hard. She saw he meant it; she saw how the blood came quick into his cheek as she said those words. It was for herself he loved her, not for lands or money. Had she followed the promptings of her own soft heart, she would have flung herself at once, in sweet abandonment, upon the painter's bosom. But a sterner tyrant ruled her actions. The Knyvett conscience, aglow with indignation, rose in full revolt.

‘Mr. Blake,’ she cried, starting back, and assuming a virtuous anger she only felt with half her nature, ‘how dare you call me by my Christian name, when you know you’ve made love for months to Meriem? How dare you be so untrue, and unkind, and unfaithful to her? Don’t try to conceal the facts from me, please, or to gloss them over, or to make light of them easily. You won’t succeed, for Meriem told me all last night; and I see what it means; you must marry Meriem!’

‘Never,’ Blake answered, hot in the face,

but disregarding her orders. 'I'll marry you, or nobody, Iris.'

He needed no wizard now to tell him she loved him. He could see so much plainly for himself. Only this wretched phantom of an imagined Meriem stood between them. And, for Meriem's sake, she would wreck all—wreck their joint lives that might be made so beautiful!

Iris gazed back at him like a marble Nemesis.

'Meriem told me,' she answered, with stern self-restraint, 'you've made love to her the way they make love in English novels. She told me you'd taken her face in your hands and kissed her often. She told me everything that passed between you. Do you think after that, in your own conscience, you've any right to marry anyone else but Meriem?'

Blake looked down at the ground with awkward shyness.

'It was the merest flirtation,' he answered,

on the defensive. 'I never meant anything but just——'

'To amuse yourself! Yes, yes ; that's it, I know. You meant to amuse yourself. It was only that to you, perhaps, I dare say ; but to Meriem—— Mr. Blake, how dare you tell me so? Don't you see she loves you! You'll break that girl's heart unless you marry her.'

'And *your* heart?' Blake cried, with a sudden burst of audacity. Love gives the most modest man a wonderful boldness. 'How about *your* heart—your own heart, Iris?'

The English girl winced. It was a home-thrust.

'My heart must break, too, if need be,' she answered, all taken aback, with a flush of passion.

'Then you *do* love me!' Blake cried, springing forward eagerly.

Iris bent her head, and blushed crimson. She thought she was only abandoning the

merest outwork when she was really giving up the entire citadel.

‘I *do* love you,’ she answered slowly. ‘But I can never marry you. If *I* can give it up, so can *you*. I will never rest till you marry Meriem.’

The painter’s heart leapt up once more with a wild delight.

‘If you admit so much,’ he said, ‘I needn’t despair. When a woman says she loves you, all has been said. I kissed her, I grant you. I’ve kissed before. If a kiss is to count for a contract of marriage—why, then——’ And he stepped forward boldly, and, with an unexpected assault, printed his lips on Iris’s forehead.

The startled girl sprang back as if she had been stung. That kiss thrilled her through in every nerve. But she knew it was wrong ; her conscience chilled her.

‘Mr. Blake!’ she cried, one flush of scarlet, ‘never dare again to touch me as long as you live! You had no right to take such an

advantage of my trust. I'll never forgive you till you've married Meriem. And now, if you please, I'll go back to madame.'

But in her own room at the Fort that night she lay on her bed for hours, in her evening dress, with the candle burning, and sobbed her throat sore with love and misery.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

COUNTERPLOT.

IN London, meanwhile, in the privacy of his chambers, Harold Knyvett, Esquire, of the Board of Trade, and of the Cheyne Row Club, Piccadilly, had been silently working out his own plans to confound that muddling old fool, Whitmarsh, and to secure the hand of his cousin Iris. For, oddly enough, it was not so much now revenge as desire that goaded on Harold Knyvett's soul to a policy of reprisals. He had suddenly awaked that evening at West Kensington to the previously obscure fact that he was in love with Iris—positively in love with her—and the knowledge of that fact, brought home to him in a flash at the moment when Iris had rejected

his suit with scorn and contumely, had impelled him forward, ever since, in a characteristic scheme for winning back, at one stroke, both his cousin and the property. So long as he believed, in his own cynical words, that 'at the present day any man may have any girl he likes for the asking,' it had never occurred to him that he was in love with Iris. The fruit was ripe to his hand when he chose to pick it. Imagining, in his own heart, he might 'marry the girl whenever he liked,' money or no money, 'by approaching her in a proper spirit from the side of the emotions,' he cared but little more for that particular girl than for any other of the five hundred well-favoured young women who, as he still firmly and fondly held, would jump down his throat any day if he opened his mouth at them. But, as soon as he had learned, by actual experiment, that this one particular maiden did not ardently desire the honour of his alliance, it suddenly struck him, with a burst

of surprise, that in his heart of hearts he wanted Iris, and no girl but Iris could possibly satisfy him.

It was not a very noble form of love, to be sure. Harold Knyvett's very affections were all purely selfish. What he thought to himself every day, more and more, now that Iris was gone over sea to Algeria, was simply this—that nobody could ever please him like Iris. With Iris, he could be happy, comfortable, contented, at his ease ; a pleasant companion secured him for ever ; no idle gossip or silly chatter to disturb his tranquil enjoyment of his after-dinner claret ; a sensible girl, with a head on her shoulders, ever ready to soothe him with her finer fancies, to touch him with her lighter thought. A man of culture should have a woman of culture as a helpmeet for him. Harold Knyvett recognised in his lofty soul that the Third Classic was his pre-established harmony, the very woman intended by Heaven to keep such a man as himself company.

And the longer he stopped away from Iris, the more profoundly each day did he feel himself in love with her. How he could ever have been such a fool as not to recognise the fact earlier, he couldn't imagine ; and that he, Harold Knyvett, of all men in the world, should have been such a fool was almost as remarkable a phenomenon in its way as even that he should admit himself for once to have been so. A fine girl, if ever there was one ; and with character, intellect, conversation, wit—everything he prized—to back up the mere external charms of a pretty face and a well-turned figure. Her hand was the daintiest little hand in London ; and the tiny feet that played under the skirts of her evening dress—well, Harold Knyvett was fain to confess in reflective moments that those tiny feet were simply ravishing.

The more he thought of them, then, the more abundantly clear did it become to his logical intelligence that, since he loved them,

he must bring their owner down on her knees in the dust before him. She had sent him off, to be sure, that evening at West Kensington, with a most undignified and unqualified dismissal. But what of that? Girls never know their own minds for ten minutes together. *Amantium iræ amoris integratio est* (as a man of taste, Harold Knyvett could even make metre out of a Latin senarius), and when she found he had come in, after all, to Sir Arthur's property, she would descend gracefully, no doubt, from her high horse, and, with some preliminary pretence at coyness, consent to marry the heir of Sidi Aia. What's worth winning's worth playing for. And Harold Knyvett, being a born gambler, was quite prepared to play a high stake for his cousin Iris.

Sir Arthur had never altered his will. Harold Knyvett determined to alter it for him.

It was a big piece of work, to be sure—a

risky job—and it required caution. One must put judgment into this sort of thing, of course. No precipitancy. Go to work slowly, judiciously, carefully, warily. That old fool Whitmarsh, ass as he was, had acquired an undoubted technical knack in detecting and exposing—well, colourable imitations of dead men's signatures ; for, in polite society, we never call them to ourselves even 'forgeries.' But what Harold Knyvett meant to do was to find somewhere a will of Sir Arthur's, leaving everything to himself personally, and duly attested by two good witnesses, both of whom must be conveniently dead, both of whom must possess at least a fair show of probability, and both of whose signatures must survive the ordeal of that old fool Whitmarsh's professional scrutiny.

Now nobody has any idea how difficult a matter it is to forge a really plausible will (*experto crede*) until he comes to try it himself experimentally. First of all—but that

is the smallest problem of any—you have to imitate the testator's signature by gradual steps till you can write it off-hand with freedom and ease like your own name ; for the smallest appearance of stiffness or formality, the faintest indication of doubt or deliberation, the remotest hint of unfamiliarity or weakness, becomes before the prying gaze of the expert in handwriting absolutely fatal. The Chabots and the Pallisers will force your hand. Every letter must be turned out boldly at a dash ; every stroke and line must be natural and seemingly quite unpremeditated. Men write their signatures so often, indeed, that the fingers acquire an instinctive twist ; it's far harder to copy successfully those few flowing curves of a native twirl than to imitate a page of ordinary manuscript.

When Harold Knyvett had managed by assiduous practice, however (on scraps of paper, all religiously burnt as soon as written), to turn out an imitation of Sir

Arthur's hand that even Netherclift himself would have hesitated to declare an undoubted forgery, the hardest part of his task still remained to him. He had letters enough of Sir Arthur's from which to work, in the first instance, and he studied them all so carefully and minutely that he could at last produce an almost perfect facsimile of the cramped and crabbed twists of the old General's gouty signature. But the will itself, with its manifold pitfalls, was a far harder and more ticklish matter. In the first place, you have to draw up something, in a legal hand and with legal phraseology, which will bear the suspicious gaze of eminent Q.C.'s, and outlive the sniffing and flaw-hunting criticism of spectacled juniors. Then there are the outsiders, those two fearsome outsiders, who, as the attestation clause charmingly phrases it, with more legal precision than literary beauty, 'being present at the same time in testator's presence, at his request, and in the presence of each other,

have hereto subscribed their names as witnesses.' How much needless trouble they gave poor Harold! how nearly they drove him to the verge of despair, in the vain attempt to make quite sure of their historical existence, their date of death, and their freedom from the disastrous taint of an *alibi*.

For Sir Arthur's will, from the very nature of the case, must necessarily have been executed either at Algiers or Aix. At no date subsequent to the execution of the first will in Iris's favour had Sir Arthur ever returned to England. Now, that awkward circumstance made the witness question a peculiarly delicate one for the amateur to handle. Harold's problem, netly put, amounted, in fact, to just this : how to find two likely persons at Aix or Algiers, both now defunct, both well known of late years to Sir Arthur, and both of whom he could be quite sure might possibly have been at a certain place on a certain date,

without fear of any meddlesome lawyer's proving that one of them on that day was actually elsewhere. For on one point Harold had made up his mind ; he would run no risk ; if he forged a will, nobody on earth would ever be able to say it was a probable forgery. They might think so, of course, as much as they liked ; thought is free in a free country—so long as you don't express it in speaking or writing. But to say so—no ; Harold Knyvett would so manage the thing that whatever suspicions old Whitmarsh might harbour they should be suspicions only, incapable of proof before judge and jury. As a man of culture he objected to the crude contrasts of prison dress ; he would not waste his valuable time in doing fourteen years of enforced seclusion among the uninteresting scenery of Portland or of Prince's Town.

' *Labor omnia vincit,*' said the Knyvett motto that surrounded the crest on Harold's neat and dainty hand-laid notepaper ; and

assiduous care did, indeed, at last conquer all difficulties in the discovery of two defunct possible witnesses, whose presence together in Sir Arthur's rooms at Aix, on a given day in the summer before last, was, to say the least of it, not plainly disprovable. With infinite pains Harold hunted them up. He had first to take into his service, indeed, in the guise of a kinsman grateful for attention bestowed, that double-faced scoundrel, Sir Arthur's valet, Gilbert Montgomery, whose deep-dyed treachery he abhorred and despised with all the strength of his own manly and simple nature. He had then, by dexterous side-hints and careful leading questions, to find out from this dangerous tool all about Sir Arthur's habits and Sir Arthur's cronies, without too obviously exciting Montgomery's suspicions. He had to fix upon two persons both dead, both at Aix at the same time, and both likely to be asked to act as witnesses. He had to hunt up among Sir Arthur's papers (which Montgomery sold

him) letters from both these persons, to imitate their handwriting, and to make sure of a day on which both might reasonably have called upon Sir Arthur without danger of anybody urging the awkward fact that on that particular afternoon one or both were ill in bed, or absent at Geneva, or engaged in some other incompatible pursuit, place or occupation. In the end, however, Harold's ceaseless pains provided against every possible contingency, and triumphed over every prospective assault of the leader of the Probate and Divorce Division. The will, in fact, was a perfect gem of forgery, calculated to deceive the very elect; so clever a fraud had never been perpetrated since Thomas Kynnersley Whitmarsh first ate his dinners at Lincoln's Inn in the callow days of the newly-fledged half-century.

So Harold Knyvett said to himself with no small satisfaction as he surveyed the document one autumn evening in the safe solitude of his own bedroom. No detail

had been neglected that leads on to success. The very paper was French, from Sir Arthur's desk at Aix-les-Bains; the ink was sand-powdered with French precision; the tape to tie it was bought in Paris; the watermark was true to year and month; everything was *en règle* with consummate forethought. As a matter of fact, Harold Knyvett had forgotten nothing. He was determined not to be caught out in a scholar's mate; and he surveyed his own work, when complete, with parental pride, as a specimen of what a man of intelligence can do when he seriously devotes his mind to forgery.

And now but one thing was left—to discover it.

Discovering a forged will is in itself an art. Foolish precipitancy in this respect may spoil everything. You may make your forgery itself as safe as houses, and yet, if you produce it without a history, so to speak, or let it drop from a clear sky, un-

accounted for, you lay yourself open to the most absurd suspicions by not being able to show cause for its due preservation. Harold Knyvett had thought of that difficulty too, but as yet he hardly saw his way well out of it. On one point only he was quite clear; he must find the will in Sir Arthur's rooms at Aix or at Mustapha. How to account for his presence at either place at this critical juncture was the sole remaining problem before him. And to the plausible solution of that one problem Harold now addressed himself.

He must get to Algeria, as it were, by accident.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LE MARCHANT BREAKS SILENCE.

ON the very same morning when Iris and Vernon Blake were having their little love passage together by the hillside at St. Cloud, Meriem had come out to the tent at Beni-Merzoug to ask assistance from her friend Le Marchant. A new-born desire had arisen in her soul, the desire to read English handwriting.

‘I want you to show me, Eustace,’ she said in her simple, straightforward way, ‘how they make the letters in England when they write to one another.’

‘You want to learn to write English, in fact,’ Eustace answered, smiling.

‘Partly that,’ the girl replied with half a

blush. 'But partly more, I want to learn how to read a letter.'

'In case Vernon should ever send you one, I suppose,' Le Marchant said with a subdued sadness in his eye and lips.

'No!' Meriem answered very decisively. 'Vernon shall never, never write to me. Vernon shall marry my cousin Iris. I've made up my mind firmly to that. I wanted to learn for another reason.'

She spoke decidedly, with concentrated determination, though it was clear the words cost her much; and Le Marchant, looking keenly through and through her, read her too far to harrow her just then with any further questioning. It would cost her a wrench to give up her painter. But the wrench must come, Le Marchant knew well. He saw that Blake was in love with Iris, and he was sure he would never dream of marrying Meriem.

He brought out some paper and pen and ink, and set Meriem a copy of *a*, *b*, *c*, in

the usual formal writing - master style. Meriem sat down to it, by a flat rock, with characteristic determination. She had a reason for learning English manuscript-hand now; and, till she had learnt it, no spare moment should be spent or wasted on any other subject.

For the next few days, accordingly, Meriem toiled hard at her new writing, but especially at deciphering the strange characters she herself had written. What she wanted most to do, however, was to read what was written in other people's hands; and to this end she made Le Marchant write down many simple words for her, and then read them herself at sight as well as she was able. By the end of a week, her progress was remarkable; previous knowledge of the cursive Arab had stood her in good stead; and she found to her surprise she could spell out a page of English manuscript with decent certainty, though by slow stages. And when once

she had reached that point, she spent many hours shut up by herself in her own bedroom in the Amine's cottage, poring hard over something held close to her face, of which she told naught to anyone anywhere.

‘Eustace,’ she said suddenly, a morning or two later, appearing with a flushed face at the tent-door, ‘you can speak French. I want to know if you’ll come with me some time over to St. Cloud, and find out something from the people down there for me.’

Le Marchant rose with a pleased face. Of late, Meriem had been very friendly with him. She wasn’t the least little bit in the world in love with him, of course ; that he knew well. He made himself no vain illusions on that foolish score. Meriem loved Vernon Blake, and her love for Vernon Blake was far too profound to allow of room in her heart for any possible rival. Still, she was friendly, uncommonly friendly. She had learned to trust him and rely upon him as a friend, with a frank trustfulness

which no English girl in our conventional world could easily have imitated. For that measure of intimacy Le Marchant was grateful ; he liked to see that Meriem trusted him ; he was sorry her love was so hopeless and so desperate.

‘What do you want to find out?’ he asked, coming out to the door, and taking her hand in his, with friendly sincerity.

‘Can I trust you?’ Meriem asked, looking him hard in the face.

‘You can trust me, Meriem ; implicitly ; for anything.’

‘So I think,’ she answered, with her keen glance fixed upon his truthful eyes. ‘You are always kind to me. I believe you. I’ll trust you. Well, then, I want to know . . . whether they have any register books kept at St. Cloud of people’s marriages earlier than the Christian year 1870.’

Le Marchant started. ‘Why so?’ he asked, in no little surprise.

‘Eustace,’ the girl said, very seriously,

laying her hand upon his arm with a sudden pressure, 'if I tell you this, you promise on your honour never to breathe a word of it to anybody.'

'I will never breathe a word of it to anybody, Meriem, if you ask me not.'

'Then this is why. I know you won't betray me. I think the books must all have been destroyed in the great insurrection of 1251—what the Christians call 1870. I hope they were. I'm sure they must have been. For the Kabyles attacked and burned down the Fort, and killed almost every living soul in the place, and even Madame l'Administratrice herself only escaped by walking across the snow in her light dressing-gown.'

'And why do you wish the books to have been burnt?' Le Marchant asked once more, with some dim anticipation of Meriem's probable meaning.

'Because,' Meriem answered, clutching his arm hard, 'my father and mother were

married at St. Cloud—secretly married in the Christian way, before a priest, and also at the Mairie—early in the beginning of 1870.’

‘How do you know that?’ Le Marchant asked, astonished.

Meriem shook her head with a decisive negation. ‘Don’t ask me how I know it,’ she cried, her fingers playing nervously meanwhile with her amulet. ‘I’m not going to tell you. Nobody shall know. But if the books at St. Cloud are really destroyed, nobody on earth will ever be able to prove it.’

‘And you don’t want it proved?’ Le Marchant exclaimed, with rising admiration.

‘I don’t want it proved,’ the girl answered eagerly. ‘Why should I, indeed?’ It could only distress me. I don’t want to take all this money from Iris. Iris shall keep it, for Vernon loves her. She shall marry Vernon, and break my heart. But Vernon will have it, for he loves Iris.’

‘And you?’ Eustace asked, looking back at her with pity.

‘And me? I’ll stop and marry Hussein or Ahmed, or any other man my uncle may sell me to.’

Le Marchant looked once more at her with infinite tenderness. But he said nothing. It must not be—it could not be; something must be done somehow to prevent it. But the time to speak out was not yet come. They started in silence, with heavy hearts, to walk over to St. Cloud, alone—together.

On the way they spoke to each other but little. Both were full of their own thoughts. It was only after they had reached St. Cloud, and Eustace had satisfied himself, by full inquiries, that the register of the *État Civil*, previous to 1870, had indeed been destroyed in the great rebellion, that they began to talk at all freely. Meriem’s mind was relieved by the discovery.

‘That’s well,’ she said, with a sigh;

‘that’s well, Eustace. Now Iris and Vernon can keep their money.’

Eustace made sure, in his own mind, she had learnt the real or supposed fact from some Kabyle woman in the village—some confidante, perhaps, of her dead mother; and he agreed with her that even if true it would now be all but impossible to prove it. So he turned back once more, half relieved like herself, since she would have it so, to find that her vague claim to the Knyvett estates grew ever more shadowy. If Meriem was satisfied, what right on earth had he to wish it otherwise?

Half-way home, they sat down on a projecting ledge of rock that overhung the valley—a ledge under the shade of a gnarled old olive-tree; and while they rested, Eustace murmured to himself, as if by accident almost, Meriem’s own words, ‘I will stop and marry Hussein or Ahmed, or any other man my uncle may sell me to!’

Meriem gazed up in his face with a half-

defiant air. Those fearless nostrils of hers quivered as she spoke ; but she said with no faltering note in her voice, ‘ Yes, I mean it, Eustace ; let Iris take Vernon, and I’ll marry Hussein.’

Le Marchant’s face was very earnest. He took the girl’s white hand in his own unresisted. Meriem liked him, and let him take it. ‘ Meriem,’ he said, with his eyes fixed full on hers, ‘ listen to me a moment. I want to speak to you seriously. You must never, never marry a Kabyle.’

‘ I must,’ Meriem answered, ‘ if my uncle sells me to him.’

Le Marchant knew his hope was infinitesimal ; but for Meriem’s sake he ventured to speak out.

‘ Meriem,’ he went on again, with a lingering cadence on each syllable of her name, ‘ the time is short, and I want to save you. I know your uncle means to marry you off shortly. I know you love Vernon and not me. I know Vernon will

never marry you. But I can't endure to think you should pass your life—you, whom I've learnt to know and love and admire—a slave to one of your countrymen in the village here. To me, this summer has been a very happy one. I've watched you and talked with you till I know you and feel towards you as towards an English lady. I know how deep and profound is your nature. Meriem, you must never marry Hussein or Ahmed. I don't ask you to love me, I don't expect you at first to love me; but for your own sake I ask you at least to wait and marry me—to save you from Ahmed or Hussein, or their like; do, Meriem, marry me.'

Meriem gazed back at him with her frank, fearless gaze.

'I can never marry any man but Vernon,' she answered quietly.

'But you're going to marry Ahmed or Hussein!' Le Marchant cried in a pleading voice. 'Why not me as well as either of

them? Surely, Meriem, you like me more than you like Hussein!’

‘But that’s quite different,’ Meriem answered slowly, endeavouring to disentangle her own mind to herself to her own satisfaction. ‘I could marry a Kabyle, because that’s not marrying at all, you know, in the way people marry in the English books—in the way I might marry you or Vernon. That’s merely being Hussein or Ahmed’s slave—picking up sticks and making *cous-cous* for them. I’ve expected that all my life long. It’s nothing new to me. I ought to be prepared for it. . . . But to marry *you*, Eustace, would be quite different. I could never marry any Englishman at all, except Vernon.’

‘Meriem,’ Le Marchant urged once more, holding her hand tight in his eager grip, and pleading earnestly, ‘I don’t ask you to marry me for my own sake in the least, though I love you dearly, and have always loved you. I ask you to marry me to get

you away from this place altogether ; I want you to put yourself into freer and more natural and congenial surroundings, to save your own life from Hussein or Ahmed. Oh, Meriem, don't throw your life away ! For your own sake, pause a moment and think. I want to take you, and save you from drudgery. Marry me first ; you may learn to love me by degrees afterwards.'

Meriem stroked the fingers that held her own with her left hand tenderly.

'Eustace,' she said, in a very soft voice, not untinged with a certain profound regret, 'I like you dearly. I know you and trust you. I'm very fond of you. Except Vernon, there's nobody else I like as I like you. In a way, I love you. I love you almost as I loved Yusuf. You've always been kind to me. You've been more than thoughtful. From the very first day when you came to Beni-Merzoug, I've always seen and noticed how kind you were. Kinder

than Vernon. I've seen that, too, all along, of course. *You* thought of *me*, while *he* thought of himself and his own pleasure. You never spoke one word of love ; you loved me silently, and tried to help me. I know all that ; I recognise all that ; don't think me ungrateful ; I like you dearly ; I love you as a sister might love a brother. But see how strangely our hearts are built ! I know all that ; yet, I love Vernon, and I could marry Vernon. I could never marry you, and partly just because I like you so dearly. I could marry Vernon because I love him ; I could marry Hussein because I hate him ; but you, never ! because I like you, and love you as a brother !' And with a simple, graceful womanly impulse she raised his trembling hand to her lips and kissed it affectionately. ' Dear Eustace,' she said, looking up at him, still with brimming eyes, ' I wish I could say *yes*, if it would give you pleasure. But I *must* say no. I'm very, very, very sorry.'

Eustace clasped her hand yet harder in his own.

‘Meriem,’ he cried, with the calm but deep emotion of middle life, ‘if you won’t marry me, you shan’t get rid of me. I’ll stop here still to watch over you and protect you. I know what sort of life you’ll have to lead. But they shall never harm you. Try at least to remain single for me. It’s intolerable to think such a woman as you should be Hussein’s slave. A woman like you, so grand and sweet! And, perhaps, in time you may forget Vernon and learn to love me.’

‘I’ve learnt to love you long ago, Eustace,’ Meriem answered, with a smile through her tearful eyes; ‘but I shall never, never forget Vernon. Iris may take him; I want her to take him; I love Iris and I love Vernon, and I want them both to be happy together; but as long as I live I shall never forget him. I shall never forget your goodness, either;

but my heart—my heart—my heart is Vernon's.'

And she held it tight to keep it from bursting.

Le Marchant rose and kissed her forehead chivalrously.

'My child,' he said, leaning over her with infinite regretful tenderness, 'I'm no boy who mistakes his first calf-love for a grand passion. I've seen many women; I've loved some; but I never loved any woman before as I love you, Meriem. I loved you from the first; what you've said to-day has made me love you better than ever. I admire you because you have a strong nature. I know I have a strong nature, too. Strong natures go forth naturally to one another. Some day, Meriem, I believe you will love me. But, love me or not, I will never forsake you. For your own sake, I'll stand by you, and protect you, and watch over you. You are to me a new interest in life. I can never let you fall into Hussein's

clutches. Come on, my child; it's growing late now, and thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you have said to-day in my favour.'

CHAPTER XXX.

SYMPTOMS.

It was a distinct surprise to Harold Knyvett to receive, a few days later, a note from his Aunt Amelia, couched in comparatively affectionate terms, and dated from 'The Fort, St. Cloud, Algeria.'

Communications with the rival branch of the Knyvett family had of course been interrupted for Harold of late ; he had heard nothing from that high-stepping girl, Iris, herself, since the memorable evening when he had proposed, to his shame, and been promptly rejected. But he was glad to find Aunt Amelia, at least—good, easy soul!—didn't share her daughter's alienated feelings. It was something to have the

maternal authority more or less on his side; and, thinking thus, Harold accepted the note as a *rapprochement*, an indirect re-opening of relations between the two high contracting parties. If Aunt Amelia held out the right hand of friendship to-day, it might fairly be expected that that recalcitrant daughter of hers, for all her fads and fancies, would follow suit most amicably to-morrow.

‘MY DEAR HAROLD,’ Mrs. Knyvett wrote, without the faintest show of resentment, or even, for that matter, of Christian forgiveness either, ‘please excuse pencil. Here we are, up in a heathenish place among the snowy mountains, which they call Grande Kabylie, stopping at a fort, where an outbreak of the natives, it seems, may be any moment expected, and indebted for our daily (sour) bread to the hospitality of a frivolous and ill-regulated young Frenchwoman, whose manners, I fear, are hardly a good example for such a high-spirited girl as our dear Iris. We left Algiers for this

dreadful place almost immediately after our arrival in the country; and here Iris has kept us ever since, much against my will, away from her comfortable home at Sidi Aia (which is really a delicious house), hunting up some mythical claim to her estate, set forward on behalf of a poor bare-footed pagan girl of the name of Meriem, or something of that sort. I won't write to you about this, however, at any length, as I understand dear Tom doesn't want the matter discussed in London. My real object in troubling you to-day is merely to ask you if you will be kind enough to do me a little favour. To add to my misfortune, as ill-luck will have it, I've managed in the last few days to get a bad attack of my old enemy, bronchitis, which has come on severely since the snow began to fall thick on the upper mountains. I haven't had such a bad turn of it for years and years, and I'm writing this with a very blunt pencil (as you see) in bed, for the houses here are most ill-constructed, and it's quite impossible, with all one's pains, to keep the draught out through these horrible

windows. What I want to know, therefore, is, whether you'll be so good, like a dear boy, as to call at our house and ask Martha for my bronchitis kettle, and the inhaler, and spray-machine, and all the prescriptions and medical things in the lower right-hand drawer of the spare bedroom dressing-table. Please put them up in a neat parcel, and take them all (addressed to me) to Dr. Yate-Westbury's (I forget where he lives in St. John's Wood, but you can look his place up in the "Post Office Directory"). He's coming over to Algiers for the season next week, as Iris learns from the Sidi Aia people; and if you ask him, I've no doubt in the world he'll be glad to bring the things over for me, as he owns the next house to ours on the hill at Mustapha. Thanking you, by anticipation, for your kindness in this matter, and with best love, in which Iris (who's out at present) would no doubt join, believe me, my dear Harold,

'Ever your affectionate Aunt,

'AMELIA MARY KNYVETT.'

The perusal of this fond and foolish letter, as he loitered over the anchovy toast at

breakfast, afforded Harold Knyvett in his own soul the keenest enjoyment. 'The Whitmarshes are all donkeys,' he thought internally, with the self-congratulatory smile of the very superior person; 'but Aunt Amelia's really the biggest donkey of the whole lot of them. The idea, now, of her blurting out like that the secret of what it is that's taken them all over to Algeria! And to me, too, of all people in the world! How mad that old ass her brother'd be if only he knew what a precious mess his affectionate sister's gone and made of it. "Doesn't want the matter discussed in London," indeed! The transparent idiot! I suspected as much when I heard he'd gone across with Iris to carry the war into Africa. So they've found out some young woman who claims to be Clarence Knyvett's heir and representative! Well, well, we may try that tack in the end, if all other plans fail, and my own little will miscarries anyhow. But it won't miscarry; it's as

safe as houses—and a great deal safer, too, in these earthquaky ages. For houses nowadays are no better than Three per Cents. I'd no idea my dear relations were away from Algiers! What a stroke of luck! The house vacant! Long may the draughts blow up Aunt Amelia's chronic bronchitis! It's a splendid chance for me to get to Sidi Aia while they're all away from it, and discover my will stowed neatly away in the back drawer of that convenient davenport!

For Harold Knyvett, who left nothing to chance, had arranged beforehand the matter of the davenport.

He finished his coffee and lighted a cigarette; then he poised the letter contemplatively in one hand before him. Dr. Yate-Westbury! Ha, ha! An idea! In luck again! Aunt Amelia had unconsciously suggested, by a single phrase, the missing link in his grand scheme. One point alone was doubtful, and Aunt Amelia

had cleared it up. He would bring that proud Iris to her knees at last! He would make her marry him or give up her property.

He stroked his chin, and smiled to himself. Dr. Yate - Westbury! The great authority upon nervous disease! He saw his way clear now to a voyage to Algiers. The man was an enthusiast for the Algerian climate. It was notorious that, having land to sell there, he regarded the place as an absolute panacea for all the ills that flesh is heir to, and especially for all forms of nervous disorder. A nervous disorder, then, was the one thing needful to secure a good plea for visiting Sidi Aia.

Harold Knyvett, to be sure, was in boisterous health. He had started in life with those two famous allies in the struggle for existence, 'a bad heart and a good digestion,' and he had never done anything yet to impair either of them. Leave from the Board of Trade, therefore, would be

difficult to get on any other pretext ; but a nervous disorder ! there, the strongest-built and seemingly healthiest man may succumb any day to an unexpected malady. Fired with the idea, he rang the bell and ordered a hansom at once.

‘ To the London Library,’ he cried aloud to the cabby, ‘ 12, St. James’s Square ; and look sharp, for I’m in a precious hurry.’

There was time before office-hours to look up the question. He reached the library, rushed upstairs, and took down from the shelf ‘ Yate-Westbury on Diseases of the Nervous System.’ He would hocus the doctor out of his own treatise.

In ten minutes, he had chosen, digested, and assimilated his disease ; he knew the symptoms of his particular malady as pat as Yate-Westbury himself could have told him them. A twitching of the fingers—yes, yes, just so ; a nervous trembling about the corners of the mouth ; loss of memory, decrease of appetite, frequent sleeplessness,

accompanied by a growing tendency to dwell minutely upon long-past events in the night watches; incapacity to write down the exact word or phrase he wanted; forgetfulness of names, even with the nearest and dearest friends or acquaintances. He had swallowed the whole diagnosis entire before he rushed off in hot haste to the office; he was the victim of a slow and insidious decay; he needed rest, change of air, relaxation, variety.

At the door of his room at the Board of Trade he met his chief, with a vacuous smile on his carefully-composed countenance.

‘Good-morning, Mr. — er——,’ he said, and paused irresolute. Then, with a sudden air of frankness he drew his hand across his forehead, and added quickly, ‘My dear sir, you’ll hardly credit it, but I’ve actually managed to forget your name. I can’t think what’s coming over my poor head lately.’

‘I’ve noticed that before,’ his chief answered, with a good-natured laugh. ‘For a long time past, in fact, I’ve observed, Knyvett, that your memory hasn’t been by any means so brisk and keen as it used to be. You’ve seemed preoccupied and absorbed and moony and distracted. If I were you, do you know, my dear fellow, I’d not lose a day ; I’d consult Yate-Westbury.’

Harold had hard work to repress a smile. Could anything on earth have happened more opportunely? It came in the very nick of time, as if he himself had carefully angled for it. No doubt, indeed, he had been preoccupied of late. When a man’s engaged in all his leisure moments with—ahem!—drawing up a will for a deceased person, he may well have but little attention left to spare for the dull and dry details of exports and imports!

‘You think so?’ he murmured, with well-assumed alarm. ‘I’m sorry for that.

But I've felt it coming on, myself, for the last two months or so. My mind seems to have lost its freshness and elasticity. It doesn't hook on to things as it used once to do. I'll take your advice. I'll consult Yate-Westbury this very evening.'

'Do,' his chief went on, with kindly considerateness. 'The service'll gain by it, in the end, no doubt. A fortnight's holiday'll be sure to set you right again. But I've noticed all along you were getting awfully fagged. Since the middle of the summer, indeed, to tell you the truth, you've never been half the sort of man you used to be.'

Harold bowed his head in affected regret.

'It's extremely kind of you to suggest it,' he said, with grateful warmth. 'I do want a change. I won't deny it. Those differential duties have run me too hard. But I'll see Yate-Westbury at once, Mr.—er—quite so—ah, Hamilton, thank you; and if he gives me a certificate to that effect,

I'll run down South for a week or two's rest and change immediately.'

'Sensible fellow, Knyvett!' the chief reflected as he turned to his desk. 'Some fellows are too deuced proud to take your advice, and resent the slightest attempt to give them a hint for the good of their health. But Knyvett's always so sound and reasonable. I'm glad I persuaded him to go to Yate-Westbury.'

As soon as the day's work was fairly over, therefore, Harold, thus fortified by extraneous advice, went round without delay to the famous specialist's. He introduced himself as his uncle's nephew, and detailed his symptoms (straight out of the book) with the greatest minuteness. The famous specialist listened with deep attention, not unmingled with paternal pride and pleasure. A plainer case he had never come across. Typical, typical! And well might it be so, for Harold's symptoms were the picked result of years of experience and

generalization, fired off point-blank in one long list at the innocent head of their observer or inventor.

‘And so you don’t sleep at nights, eh?’ Dr. Yate-Westbury said, gazing through and through him, with an inquiring air. ‘Well, well, that’s bad. But usual, very. And, tell me now, what do you mostly think about when you’re lying awake in these fits of sleeplessness?’

‘Why,’ Harold answered, playing nervously and ostentatiously with his fingers on a button of his coat while he endeavoured at the same time to make the corners of his mouth twitch and jerk as conspicuously as possible, ‘nothing much, thank Heaven! I’m not troubled that way. I don’t think of anything of the slightest importance. Merely minute old childish reminiscences, and all that sort of thing.’

The specialist smiled a grim smile of recognition—as, to be sure, he might, for the symptom confirmed his own diagnosis.

‘And why do you pull about your button like that?’ he asked, darting down upon him with sudden emphasis.

Harold glanced down, and pretended for the first moment to notice the movement.

‘I—I don’t know why,’ he answered meekly. ‘I wasn’t aware I was pulling it about till you called my attention to it. Indeed, Dr.—er—er——’ and he forgot the name with the most skilful innocence, ‘I don’t think I pull things about so usually.’

‘Do you haggle over names much?’ the specialist asked, with a knowing look. ‘I notice you forgot what mine was this moment.’

Harold hugged himself inwardly on the perfect way in which he was diddling his man with such a transparent fiction.

‘A good deal of late,’ he answered, his fingers rising up once more to the button, as if unconsciously. ‘But it’ll soon pass over,’ he added, with pretended nervousness.

‘It won’t go on long. A mere passing ailment. I’ll be all right again in a week or two, I fancy.’

‘Look here, Mr. Knyvett,’ the doctor said seriously. ‘I won’t conceal from you the painful fact that your case is a dangerous one—a distinctly dangerous one. We must be very careful. We must face these facts. You know what this sort of thing generally leads to?’ He lowered his voice and almost whispered in his ear, ‘Insanity, my dear sir—simple insanity.’

Harold assumed a profoundly-horrified air. He was a good actor, and had the muscles of his face well under control.

‘You don’t mean to say so!’ he cried, in apparent alarm. ‘Oh, don’t say that, Dr.—er—er—Yate-Eastbury.’

Dr. Yate-Westbury closed his lips tight.

‘There’s only one thing for you to do,’ he said, with emphatic severity. ‘You must take a holiday—a complete holiday. No half-measures—a thorough change. I

see by your eyes you've been over-exciting yourself too much about some business or other lately. You have the air of a man who has been profoundly absorbed by private affairs. A bachelor, you say; self-centred! self-centred! The root of all evil, if people would but see it. You need change of air, distraction, diversion, amusement. You should go abroad; Nice, shall we say? or Mentone? or Monte Carlo?' He paused for a second, and stroked his chin. 'Or, stay,' he went on, as if struck by an inspiration, 'why not Algiers? It's the very place for people who suffer from your special symptoms. Air's sedative, soothing, and extremely bland. As it happens, in fact, I'm going there myself for the winter on Monday. You'd better come with me. In your present state of health, you need constant medical advice and attention. I've a villa on Mustapha, just next door to your uncle Sir Arthur's. Miss Knyvett's there now already, I believe,

so you'll find yourself at once in the bosom of your family. A charming young lady ; I met her out last season. We needn't say anything to her or others about our fears and suspicions for the future, of course——' here Dr. Yate-Westbury nodded and smiled with an air of profound professional mystery. 'Mum's the word there. I'll give you a certificate of a non-committing sort for the Board of Trade people ; you know the line of country—overwork ; nervous exhaustion ; need of rest and change of scene ; and you'll be ready to start with me from Charing Cross on Monday.'

Harold thanked his disinterested adviser with gloomy gratitude, and completed his arrangements with an internal chuckle. As he left the room, he didn't himself observe that his fingers were toying once more in a nervous way with that unfortunate button. If he had, indeed, he would only have reflected with a mental smile that he was simulating the symptoms even better than

he intended. But Dr. Yate - Westbury noticed it with his keen glance, and remarked to his assistant, as Harold disappeared towards the front-door:

‘ Remarkable case, Prendergast. We must keep our eye upon him. Premonitory signs of acute dementia; and what’s more odd, the worst among them are not at all the ones he himself seems to think the most important!’

CHAPTER XXXI.

STRICTLY PROFESSIONAL.

To Harold Knyvett the voyage to Algiers came as a welcome amusement. He really wanted rest; he was glad to escape from London fog and London mud, after the intense strain of the last few months, to the olives, and mulberry-trees, and evergreens of the South. As the *train de luxe* from Paris rolled along in the early morning light down the wide Rhone Valley, past gardens still gay with roses and anemones, past cypress walls that guarded the tender vineyards from the cold blast of the icy mistral, past distant vistas of the snow-clad Alps, past fields where bronzed Provençal peasants toiled in the broad sunshine among

luscious flowers, he was gratified at the success of his *ruse*, and delighted at the freshness and perennial beauty of the ever-glorious Mediterranean borderland. A certain indefinite exaltation of success filled all his heart. Things were going well with him. Fortune favoured. For he was on his way to Mustapha, to the very next house to Sir Arthur's villa, with the forged will buttoned safely up in his inner breast-pocket, and all in the most natural possible fashion. Even the suggestion to 'Try Algiers' had not come from within. His chief had recommended him to consult Yate-Westbury; and Yate-Westbury would be able to relate hereafter to his acquaintances the curious coincidence how this lucky young man in the Board of Trade had come to him for advice, quite by accident, about a nervous complaint—overwork and loss of memory; how he had urged him to visit the soothing climate of North Africa; and how the upshot of it all was the incidental

discovery of the long-lost will, unearthed in some remote corner of Sir Arthur's villa—that will which restored the property to the rightful heir, and brought about at last the happy reunion of the Knyvett family.

For he meant to marry Iris in the long-run. The estate itself was now to some extent a minor matter. He regarded it merely as a means to an end. And the end was to bring that proud girl to her knees: to compel her to marry him, willy-nilly.

He loved Iris. He *would* have Iris. No power in the world should keep him from Iris. The only girl on earth he had ever cared twopence about; the only girl on earth who was really worthy of him.

So he rolled along in high good-humour down to Marseilles, seeing success now well in view, and went with joy on board the *Ville de Naples*, which was to carry Harold Knyvett and all his fortunes—forged will

included—to the golden shores of sunny Africa.

The sole drawback to his pleasure, indeed, was that intolerable old bore of a nervous specialist, who insisted upon treating him as a critical patient—half cracked, in short—and reading him sermons on the absolute need for distracting his mind from his own absorbing personality. Harold Knyvett didn't want his mind distracted just then. He was more than distracted enough already. It was a nuisance, when you preferred to admire the blue bay and the white Provençal hills receding in the distance, to be compelled to listen to that frantic old idiot's professional drivel, and to bear in mind spasmodically from time to time the necessity for keeping up somehow the most prominent symptoms. Not that the twitching of the fingers gave him much trouble by this time. Practice makes perfect. He was able to manage *that* part of the farce, thank goodness, without the slightest

apparent effort. The state of nervous tension into which he had been thrown by the consciousness of holding the forged will concealed about his person, and by the momentous issues depending upon the success of his well-laid scheme, made a certain amount of uneasy fingering, indeed, perfectly natural to him. You can simulate nervousness readily enough, when you really feel it; the difficulty would have been, in Harold's condition, to simulate the calm of uneventful existence.

‘What you have most to guard against,’ Dr. Yate-Westbury remarked once in a confidential undertone, as they paced the deck together, cigar in mouth, ‘is too exclusive a concentration of mind and thought upon your own personality and your own interests. You live too much in yourself, my dear sir; that’s what’s the matter with you. Your brain’s wrapped up in private schemes and designs and ideas; I can see them whirling and circling

in your head. You ought to be married, and enlarge your sphere; a wife and children would drive all that sort of thing promptly out of you.'

Harold laughed in his sleeve to think how curiously the mad-doctor had put his finger by accident upon the very point. *Rem acu tetigit.* His mind was indeed wrapped up in private schemes and designs and ideas. He stroked his breast pocket stealthily with his hand outside. It was safe, quite safe, that precious document! He could feel it rustle under the coat as he pressed. His private schemes and designs and ideas, indeed! Ah, yes, but they all led on by a direct route to that very marriage which the doctor counselled. A wife and children! Ho, ho! the humour of it! Well—a wife, if you like; a wife's all right enough; but as for the children, why, Harold was strongly inclined to say about them, 'Le Roy s'avisera.' He didn't want a parcel of noisy brats running about

the place—the mansion of his fancy. All he wanted was a peaceful interchange of ideas in spacious grounds with such a girl as Iris—a pleasant companion laid on, as it were, like the gas, and the water, and the electric bells, and ready at any moment to amuse and divert him with her chatty conversation and her tender playfulness.

‘The great error of the nervous constitution,’ the specialist went on, puffing away reflectively at one of Harold’s very best *Fortuna di Cubas*, ‘is, not to put too fine a point upon it, selfishness. My system of cure consists entirely in such a course of rational treatment as will succeed in taking the patient fairly out of himself. The narrow circle of one’s own interests leads at last to nervous disintegration. People should avoid being too self-centred. That way, as Shakespeare says, madness lies. One’s got strenuously to fight against it, or else to succumb to it. Have you read my book on Mental Disease? You know

the theory I there lay down on the origin of insanity ?'

The subject was intensely distasteful just then to Harold.

'No, I haven't,' he answered, with some asperity. 'I avoid all books on the brain, on principle.'

'Well, my theory is,' Yate - Westbury went on with professional zeal, disregarding his tone, 'that insanity's not a malady of the intellect at all, as most people imagine: it's a malady of the social and moral nature. A man who lives a healthy, varied, natural life—who mixes freely with his fellow-men—who troubles himself much about their welfare and their happiness—who reads and thinks and works and plays—who vividly represents to himself the feelings and wishes and ideas of others—such a man as that, now, never goes mad. He has no temptation. His surroundings are too sane and his interests too numerous. A family, friends, public duties, society—all those

are safeguards against the insane tendency. Literature, science, art, politics—the wider your world, the less your chance of nervous derangement. But the fellow who lives a purely selfish, concentrated life—the bachelor who takes his ease all day long at his club—the man of means who finds society and family ties a bore, whose social instincts are inefficiently awakened, whose public spirit is dormant or non-existent—those are the people, if you look around, who go mad easily. They take to hobbies, or else to monomanias. Some pet design, or some favourite scheme, most often purely personal, absorbs their energies. If it succeeds, they go mad with delight; if it fails, they go mad, *per contræ*, with disappointment.’

Harold’s fingers toyed unconsciously with the top button of his tweed tourist suit. The precious paper rustled melodiously underneath. The sound was like muffled music in his ears.

‘You think so?’ he said, half stifling a yawn. ‘You think insanity depends upon self-concentration?’

‘Think so!’ Yate-Westbury echoed, with a touch of contempt in the intonation of his voice. ‘Think so! My dear sir, I don’t think so; I know it. I’ve studied the question. The proof’s just this. You must have met madmen over and over again in asylums——’

‘I don’t visit asylums,’ Harold interposed drily.

‘Still, you must have met madmen, anyhow,’ the doctor went on, warming up to his subject, ‘who thought they were rich, who thought they were poor, who thought they were Napoleon, who thought they were the rightful heir to the Crown, who thought they were the authors of “Paradise Lost,” who thought they were persecuted by wicked relations, who thought they were the Czar or the Prophet Mahommed. But you never met a madman anywhere who

thought *somebody else* had come into a fortune, *somebody else* was the Khan of Tartary, *somebody else* was followed and annoyed, *somebody else* was the ill-used inheritor of the Throne of England. Self, self, self, self. All insane people have but one cry: *I am this, I am that, I am the other.* It's *I, I, I*, whatever they say. They forget their children, their wives, their friends, their enemies ; but they never for a single moment forget their own delusion, or their own pet grievance.'

Harold moved away restlessly, with a moody air, towards the side of the ship. This talk annoyed him. He didn't want to be bored by abstract discussions about the habits and manners and natural history of the insane, when he was going to Algiers to prove his title to a splendid estate, and to compel his cousin Iris to marry him! He was full of himself, and resented boredom. A man can't be worried with rubbish like that while all his soul brims over,

seething with one great design, on whose success or failure he has staked his whole future fate and happiness. One picture alone now usurped his brain and monopolized consciousness—the picture of himself, rummaging drawers at the villa at Sidi Aia, and engaged in discovering Sir Arthur's will—the forged one, of course; but that was a detail—in some hidden corner of his uncle's *escritoire*.

And then to be obliged to listen respectfully to that old image droning, droning, droning on—‘The great thing to avoid is intense preoccupation with one's own affairs; too profound an entanglement in any private or personal piece of business. To people of the selfish or self-centred type, such preoccupation is frequently next door to fatal. It drives them at last by slow degrees into acute dementia.’

Good heavens! Would the man never cease his chatter? Gabble, gabble, gabble, the whole day long! And Sir Arthur's

will nestling all the time in his safe breast - pocket ! Preoccupation, indeed ! Who could help being preoccupied ? Sir Arthur's fortune, and Iris Knyvett !

CHAPTER XXXII.

‘AUX ARMES, CITOYENS!’

UP in the mountains, meanwhile, strange things were taking place among those idyllic Kabyles. But neither Le Marchant nor Blake nor Meriem knew as yet anything about them.

It was a chilly evening of Algerian winter.

The naturalist was sitting at home, somewhat shivering in the tent, trying on a complete new suit of woollen Kabyle costume which he had bought as a curiosity at a neighbouring market to take home to England. Vernon Blake was dining out by special invitation at the Fort at

St. Cloud, where Iris and he were conversing unreprieved with much animation under Uncle Tom's very nose—so unsuspecting is age when once its views are firmly hardened. And Meriem was seated on the hard mud floor in her own room at the Amine's cottage, thinking in her poor lonely soul how much better it would have been for her if those two flaring meteors of Englishmen had never darted with their disturbing influence across her peaceful, old-fashioned Kabyle horizon.

But on the hillside without a very different scene might have presented itself to her eyes, had she happened to look forth towards the village platform from her narrow mud window. For there, under the open sky, and in the broad moonlight, the men of the Beni-Merzoug were assembled together in the ancient fashion under all arms, and in their midst the eldest of the marabouts stood erect, with flashing eyes, and stretched his bare arms

heavenwards in awful prayer before the eager eyes of the whole assembly.

‘Hush!’ the Amine cried, with a commanding voice, as the marabout beckoned with one hand for silence. ‘The servant of Allah will speak over the chosen youths—the youths who go forth, like their fathers of old, for the defence of their fatherland against the infidel and the oppressor.’

A great stillness fell at his words upon the entire meeting. The buzz and hum of voices ceased at once to thrill, and the men dropped down at the signal on their bended knees before the glowing face of the inspired marabout. Incense rose in fumes from a brazier in the midst—the poisonous, intoxicating incense of haschisch.

The marabout spread out both arms slowly over their heads. ‘The blessing of Allah,’ he cried aloud, ‘of Allah, the All-wise, the All-merciful, be with you.’

‘So be it,’ the young men responded solemnly.

‘Friends,’ the marabout began, once more, as they knelt and bent their heads, in a serried body, ‘you know well the crisis, and the custom of the Kabyles. It was the way of our fathers, when hordes like locusts invaded their land, to call upon the chosen young men of the tribes to band themselves together by solemn oath into a sacred legion. The more forlorn the hope, the greater their courage; for the sons of the Kabyles shrink not from self-sacrifice. It is your duty, too, in like manner, to sacrifice your lives to-day for your country. To that end we have proclaimed a Sacred War, when Islam shall rise in all its might against the power of the Infidel. In such a war there is no going back. It is as when the lion rushes upon the spears. You will take the oath before the face of Allah. The prayers for the dead shall be read over you all, for you go to your death, and you come not back, except upon trestles, or else with victory. Those who die in this conflict shall be buried

apart, in the cemetery of the saints, in the field of glory ; and each man among them, dying for the Faith, shall be reckoned as a saint and counted a Sidi. Prayers shall be offered for ever at his tomb, and the blessing of Allah shall rest upon it always. But if any of you escape with loss of honour from the field, his corpse shall rot like a camel's in the desert. He, and all his kindred, shall be held for ever in utter contempt by all the Faithful as dogs and outcasts.'

The young men bowed their foreheads to the ground with one accord, and with military precision. 'We accept,' they answered, 'we go, for Allah!' and with their faces turned one way towards Mecca, they prayed silently for a few minutes.

'You swear,' the marabout said again, as they rose from the ground, holding out in his hand a roll of the Koran, 'you swear by this sacred book, which came from Mecca, and by the holy tomb of our Lord of Kerouan, the companion of the Prophet, to wage a

Jehad to the death against all infidels, and never to return from the field of battle save dead or victorious.'

'We swear,' the young men answered solemnly, with uplifted hands.

'Let a Taleb come forward,' the marabout said, stretching his bare arms once more heavenward.

Hadji Daood ben Marabet staggered slowly forward, and took the roll from the marabout's hands in his trembling fingers. Unfolding it spasmodically, and with due deliberation, the toothless old man came at last in his search to the fourteenth chapter, which enjoins on the Faithful the duty of exterminating the infidels everywhere. Bending over the book, he read those terrible lines aloud in their sonorous Arabic, with that peculiar droning, sing-song voice which lends so much mystery and solemnity of tone to Mahomedan ceremonial. His words thrilled them. Every curse told home separately. The men, it was clear,

were deeply stirred. They clasped their short Kabyle knives with desperate resolution in their trembling fingers, and waited impatiently for the signal to march upon their deadly errand.

The voice of the reader wavered at last upon the awful closing sentence, 'Neither man nor woman, lord nor servant, old age nor infancy : spare none, but slay ; spill their blood on the ground ; let the infidels perish utterly from the earth, saith Allah.'

A deep murmur of 'Amens' ran like a shudder through that heaving crowd. Hadji Daood sank back, exhausted, into the ring. Then the marabout stepped forth once more, with his wild locks tossed shaggily over his bronzed forehead, and in a loud voice, with foaming mouth, began to recite in solemn tones the prayers for the dead over the chosen youths, pointing with his finger to their bodies while he spoke, as though each of them lay already on his bier in an open grave spread out before him.

The effect was electric, overwhelming, irresistible. The old men, standing round, sobbed aloud over the heads of their doomed sons. The young men, kneeling in front, felt the tears trickle slowly down their hot cheeks. The marabout himself faltered once or twice with a choking voice, and then went on again, sustained, as it seemed, in his holy task by some direct inspiration of his bloodthirsty deity. His features were deadly pale and convulsed, and his limbs were working as though drawn by wires. At the close of the prayers, all rose once more in their long white robes, and the marabout cried aloud, in a more martial tone, ‘ You have heard your duty ! Go now and perform it ! The Beni-Yenni and the Aith Menguellath are marching on St. Cloud. March you, too, direct, and surprise the infidels in their beds as they sleep. Slay, slay, slay—men, women and children. Let not one single Christian escape with his life. French, English, or Spaniard, slay all

alike; but above all, slay *her*, the enemy of your race, the high-heeled woman! Avenge on her, and on all beneath her roof, the bones of the blessed Sheikh el-Haddad the Blacksmith! Avenge on her the bones of Si Mohammed Said with the Two Tombs, whose holy remains she cast out on the field to be defiled by dogs and vultures and jackals!

With a loud unearthly shout, the whole vast body, seizing rifles and swords, put itself tumultuously and fiercely under way. Religious frenzy and the fumes from the brazier had driven the men mad. Their lips were blue; their eyes started from their sockets; great drops of sweat poured down their pale and haggard faces. 'Jehad! Jehad!' they cried, in a mad shriek for vengeance. 'Death to the infidel! To St. Cloud! To St. Cloud! Slay, slay, every man, every woman, every child of them!'

The musicians in front beat upon their drums, and twanged aloud their tortoise-

shell lyres. The wild discordant music of the tomtoms and castanets seemed to intensify and inflame their fury. 'To St. Cloud!' the marabout shouted, at the top of his voice, in fierce tones, his hair now flying loose on the breeze behind, his eyes blood-shot, and his mouth foaming. He waved his bare arms wildly around him. 'Slay the high-heeled woman,' he shouted, 'and all her house, in honour of Allah and Mahommed his Prophet; and cast forth her body for dogs to eat, as Jehu of Israel cast forth the body of Jezebel, the idolatress, before the gates of Jezreel, and as Omar the Caliph cast forth the body of the accursed Roumi before the gates of Sidon.'

At the word, he dragged a goat from behind into their midst. 'Taste blood,' he shrieked, and flung it towards them. With hideous shouts, the fanatics rushed, with hooked fingers, upon that symbolical victim, tore it limb from limb alive and bleeding, and fought with one another like wild beasts

for the quivering morsels, more after the fashion of ravenous wolves than of human beings. Their faces and hands reeked with blood. 'Now, on to St. Cloud!' the marabout yelled out, tearing a live snake and devouring it before their eyes.

'Jehad! Jehad!' the crowd shouted aloud, in response, with savage tumult. 'Slay, slay! the voice of Allah proclaims it! A Holy War! Death, death to the infidels!' And, drunk with blood and hashisch, they dashed madly onward.

Meriem in her own room, sitting still on the floor, heard with surprise the tramp of feet and the mingled noise of many voices, and rushed to her window, breathless, to learn the meaning of it. As she did so, she just caught the last echoes of those shrill cries, 'Jehad! Jehad! Slay the high-heeled woman and all her house! A Holy War! Death, death to the infidels!'

In a moment her reeling brain took it all

in. She guessed what it meant. She understood instinctively. Her quick wit realized the truth at once in all its hideous implications. They were going to St. Cloud to murder the Europeans! And amongst them they would murder Iris and Vernon!

At the sound, Islam died out within her.

For to Meriem a Jihad was no idle word. She had heard awful tales on the village platform, many a summer evening, of the great uprising of 1870. She had heard from the mouths of the actors themselves how the religious fanatics of that troublous time had massacred, in hot blood, the entire population of Palaestro; had carried off into slavery the women and children of the European villages scattered throughout Kabylie; had burnt to the ground every farmhouse, church, and oil-mill in the mountains; had besieged Bougie and invested Djidjelly; had spread fire and slaughter far and wide through the land,

from the valley at Tizi-Ouzou to the eagle's nest of French soldiers perched on the precipitous heights of Fort National. She knew that when the fierce and fiery Kabyle blood is up, neither childing mother nor speechless babe will be spared from the slaughter by their indiscriminate fury. She knew that her countrymen would fall upon St. Cloud like wolves upon a sheepfold, and rend Iris and Vernon to pieces like vultures in their fanatic madness.

A Holy War! A campaign against the infidels! Vernon and Iris—her dearest on earth! In that decisive moment the faith of her childhood went down like water before her instinctive feelings. At all hazards, she must save the lives of the Christians!

There was but one thing to do : to make at once, with all speed, for the valley of Tizi-Ouzou. It was too late now to warn the garrison at St. Cloud. She saw her countrymen were well on the road to the Fort already, and she could never hope to

pass them by undetected, even if her feet were fleet enough and strong enough to overtake them and outrun them. But the garrison, though surprised, might hold out till morning. She had heard of the iron wires that carry news with lightning speed for the infidel—of the iron-horse that drags his carriages like clouds before the sirocco. If she could but reach Tizi-Ouzou and warn the French there to telegraph to Algiers, help might yet arrive in time to save them. To save Iris : to save Vernon ! The Kabyle within her was forgotten altogether in her burning desire to protect from death those two she had learned to love so dearly. Traitor as she might be to her own people, she had but one thought—to save Iris and Vernon !

She lifted the latch of the rude door, and stole out unperceived to the entrance of the tent, where Eustace stood within, in the Kabyle dress he had just been trying on, and which transformed him at once into

a perfect native. Meriem started to see him, but had no time for comments. 'Eustace,' she cried, in haste, snatching up a flask that lay upon the box, 'they've made a Jihad—a sacred war. My people have risen. It's death to the infidels. They're marching on St. Cloud to kill the Christians. The whole village together has turned out in arms. I saw them myself—the marabout at their head! They mean to kill every soul in the Fort! What can we do—to save Iris and Vernon?'

In her startled face Eustace read the whole truth instinctively at once. He knew the impetuous Moslem nature too well to doubt that Meriem was right in her strange story. 'We must go on and warn them!' he cried in answer hurriedly.

'Too late!' Meriem sobbed out. 'No chance for that! They're on the road already. Our people have started. I saw them go. There's no other way down. We could never get past them.'

‘Can they telegraph to Tizi - Ouzou?’ Eustace asked in haste. ‘If reinforcements could come, they might hold out for a day or so.’

Meriem shook her head despondently. ‘My people would be sure to cut the wire,’ she answered, in agony. ‘They know all that. It crosses the path. Even I, who am only a girl, had heard of it.’

‘Then there’s nothing for it but to tramp to Tizi-Ouzou,’ Eustace answered at once, with prompt decision. ‘Our only hope lies in rousing the authorities there; they might telegraph on for help to Algiers and Fort National. Come on, Meriem. There’s not a moment to lose. Come with me, and tell them when you get there what you’ve seen. We might ride, perhaps. There are mules outside. Let’s seize them, and run down at once to Tizi-Ouzou.’

So, quick as thought, going forth from the tent, in his Kabyle dress unchanged as he stood (it was safer so), he caught the

first two mules he could find in the field, and slipping on a bridle in breathless haste, mounted one of them himself to descend the mountain. Meriem, without one word, held and mounted the other. And in such strange guise did those two set off through the moonlight, alone, to rouse the unconscious settlers of Tizi-Ouzou to a sense of the danger that threatened the colony.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AMONG THE SNOWS.

THEY had gone but a few hundred yards down the path, riding single file on the narrow Kabyle road, which cactus and aloe obstructed on either side, when suddenly Meriem, who went first, was brought to a halt by the sharp and short report of a pistol, fired full in the face of her borrowed mount. C'r'r'r, it whizzed past the mule's very nose. The animal reared upright with terror on its haunches for a moment, and Meriem, looking ahead towards the darkling bushes in front, called out in Kabyle tremulously, but in very clear tones: 'Who's there? Why fire at us?'

As she spoke, two men crept cautiously out from the shadow of the lentisk scrub, and one of them answered in a sulky voice, and in the same tongue, which Eustace could now just vaguely follow, 'Who are you, and where are you off to to-night, the wrong way down, when the sons of the Kabyles are marching in a mass against the homes of the infidel?'

The men were not of her own tribe. Meriem knew at once, by their peculiar dialect. They were Beni-Yenni, from the village beyond the Fort, posted there, no doubt by arrangement, to guard the pass down to Tizi - Ouzou against retreating Christians. There must be dozens more of them picketed lower down the road. To proceed that way would be clearly useless. Retreat was impossible, so Meriem temporized. 'I'm a woman,' she said—'a true believer—and I was going to the chief of the Beni-Yenni, with letters and messages from the Amine of the Beni-Merzoug.'

The stranger, advancing, seized the bridle of her mule with a suspicious glance.

‘And your husband?’ he cried, with a scowl at Le Marchant. ‘Why is he, a man of military age, skulking from the Holy War at such a moment?’

‘My husband,’ Meriem answered with trembling lips, hoping in her heart Eustace would have the sense not to break into words and betray himself for a Christian, ‘is a deaf and dumb man. He’s useless as a soldier. So my uncle, the Amine, has sent him to take care of me.’

‘It’s a lie!’ the Kabyle answered, wrenching the mule aside suddenly, and gazing straight into Eustace’s eyes. ‘Fire, Mohammed, fire! These are traitors—infidels! I know the man’s face. They’re going down to Tizi-Ouzou to warn the garrison.’

Meriem’s heart leapt up into her mouth at this unexpected emergency.

‘Leave your mule and run, Meriem,’ Eustace cried, in English, jumping as he

spoke from his own beast, and seizing her tremulous hand hard in his. Next moment a bullet whizzed hissing past his ears, and a short Kabyle knife gleamed white and bright in the clear moonlight.

The Englishman seized his assailant in his stout arms, and, grasping him round the waist, with one violent effort flung him from him heavily upon the path behind. Then, unarmed as they were—for Eustace hadn't even waited to hunt up his revolver in the hurry of the moment—they turned and fled headlong into the thick lentisk scrub, and down the steep gully of broken hillside towards the brook at the bottom. Delay was dangerous with so many unseen enemies about. The stones under foot slipped as they went, for the slope was rubbly, and Eustace tore his hands more than once in clutching at the bushes to save Meriem from too hasty and abrupt a descent; but Meriem, all barefooted as she was, leaped lightly down unhurt, like some

mountain antelope, and planted her sole firmly at last on the soft mould in the centre of the gully.

‘What can we do now?’ she whispered low, as shots were heard again whizzing over their heads from the rocks above, the Kabyles firing at random in the direction they had taken. ‘There’s no getting down to Tizi-Ouzou at this rate, and no other road except back by the Fort to St. Cloud, and so on to Fort National.’

Eustace made his mind up without a moment’s hesitation.

‘We’ve only one thing left to do,’ he answered boldly. ‘The passes are held on either side. We must go over the mountains, right across the Col, and descend upon the Constantine railway in the valley. At Bouira, or the first other station we reach, they could telegraph for aid to Algiers and Philippeville.’

Meriem shuddered. It seemed impossible.

‘Upon the Constantine railway!’ she

cried, in a low voice, half terrified. 'Over the high mountains! No other way left! We must trudge through the snow, then!'

And she gazed down ruthfully at her poor bare feet, ill-fitted, indeed, for such a walk as that was.

'There's nothing else possible,' Le Marchant answered, following her eyes with his own as they looked downward timidly—'for me, at least. I must go to Bouira. But, Meriem, why need you accompany me? Couldn't you steal back unperceived to the village? The walk's too long and too hard by far for you, my child.'

'Never,' Meriem answered, with profound conviction. 'Never, while Iris and Vernon are in danger. I'll walk my feet bare to the bone before I desert them, Eustace. We'll rouse all Algeria rather than let them be murdered in cold blood at St. Cloud, if we have to trudge through miles of snow to do it.'

Le Marchant saw that she meant what

she said, and he made no attempt to turn her from her purpose. He admired it too much to wish to interfere with it.

‘Come on, then,’ he said, looking her full in the face. ‘We must start at once. Not a moment to lose. Up these first heights here will lead us to a point where we can see the Djurjura. Once we catch sight of the snowy peaks in this bright moonlight, we can find our way well. We must walk all night; but by early morning, with good luck, we may reach Bouira.’

Not another word was spoken. They turned at once to set out toilsomely on that difficult and dangerous mountain journey. Between them and the main central valley of the Atlas, down whose midst the grand trunk-line of Algeria, from Oran to Constantine, winds by long gradients its tortuous way, lay the huge white snow-covered mass of the Djurjura. Only two passes threaded the lateral ranges on either side from Beni-Merzoug: one of them led

back to Tizi-Ouzou, and was held in force by the Beni-Yenni mountaineers: the other led forward to the Fort at St. Cloud, and was the one down which the Beni-Merzoug themselves had marched to massacre the isolated little garrison. How far the insurrection might spread on either side, Le Marchant had not the faintest conception; but he hoped by reaching civilization once more on the line of the railway route he might still be in time to avert the menaced massacre at that doomed outpost. To do so, however, no plan was possible save the desperate one of crossing the snowy ridge between the sister peaks of Tamgout and Lalla Khadidja. They had to make their way alone, at dead of night, through trackless wilds, and over untrodden snow, in a country the greater part of which was absolutely unknown to either one of them. But it was the sole remaining chance for saving the lives of their friends at St. Cloud; and they faced it together, bravely and silently.

The hillside above the gorge was steep and rocky, but they mounted it, step by step, in dead silence, creeping up under the shadows of the wild olive-bushes and the low genista scrub, for fear of attracting the attention of the Kabyles opposite, as long, at least, as they remained within range of a rifle-shot. As they toiled on and up, under the moonlit sky, the air at each level they attained grew colder and colder. Olives slowly gave way to pine and cedar; cedars again ceased, in turn, in favour of low clumps of wind-swept juniper. Meriem drew her thin white robe closer and closer around her. She was chilled by the freezing wind, and her teeth chattered.

‘Here,’ Le Marchant cried, pulling off his own upper cloak—the outer Kabyle garment—‘you must wrap this about your shoulders, my child; it’s better than nothing.’

‘No, no,’ Meriem answered, holding her haik tight in her numbed fingers, and

shaking her head; 'keep it yourself; you need it more than I do. We Kabyles are accustomed to winter-cold. We go about barefoot, even when the snow lies deep and thick on our own mountains.'

Le Marchant wrapped it round her, in spite of her remonstrances, with an imperious gesture.

'You must take it,' he said. 'You're the less warmly clad by far of the two. Thank heaven, I've a thick English jersey, unchanged, under my bernouse. Besides, what we want is for both to pull through. We mustn't let either fail on the summit.'

They walked on quickly over the intervening ground, mile after mile, up, up—up ever, till they reached the snow-line on the high Col between the two rearing moonlit mountains. At its edge, Le Marchant sat down on a great ice-worn boulder, and began pulling off his boots very quietly.

'What are you doing?' Meriem asked, repressing a shiver.

‘Taking my boots off,’ Le Marchant answered, as if for a gentleman to be so employed were the most natural proceeding in the world.

‘So I see,’ Meriem replied. ‘But what for?’

She knew already; but until he told her, natural politeness suggested it would be rude to anticipate.

‘You must put them on,’ Le Marchant answered firmly, handing them over to her. ‘You can’t go and tramp through the snow barefoot. They’ll be a deal too big for you, but they’re better than nothing. I have my stockings. We shall both be protected against the worst of the cold to some extent.’

Meriem shook her head.

‘No, no,’ she said eagerly; ‘I can never wear them. I’m accustomed to go barefoot often in the snow. You’re not. My soles are hardened to it. Besides, they’d slip off my poor little feet like anything.’

Le Marchant made no verbal reply, but taking out the handkerchief concealed in his bosom, he tore it in two, and bound each half tight round Meriem's insteps. Meriem, looking on in wonder, allowed him to do it. Next, he gathered on the hillside a few handfuls of the dry Algerian club-moss, as soft as tow, and twining it close around the two rags of handkerchief, thrust her feet, thus bound, into his own boots, which he proceeded to lace up in solemn silence, in spite of Meriem's protests and exclamations. 'I can fill up my socks with moss,' he went on quietly, 'and that'll keep the warmth of my feet from melting the snow. It's freezing to-night. The surface'll all be hard and firm. If you can hold out, I can hold out, Meriem.'

Meriem's eyes were dim with tears.

'If you make me take them, I can go on all night, Eustace,' she said simply. And she took his hand in hers with a friendly pressure.

The Englishman's eyes moistened also, but he said nothing. He stuffed his socks with the soft moss, and, lifting her by the hand, raised her gently from the ground, in the unaccustomed foot-gear. They walked on through the snow, thus equipped, for a few hundred yards. Then Meriem sat down on the crisp, hard snow.

'Take them off, Eustace,' she said faintly. 'I can walk better without them. They seem to clog my feet so much. I'm not accustomed to these great hard things. I'd a thousand times rather you yourself wore them.'

Le Marchant saw she really meant it; the unusual weight impeded her free and graceful movements; so he sat down by her side and unlaced the clumsy things without a word.

'We can exchange,' he said, as soon as he had finished. 'I'll take the boots, and you the stockings.'

'Oh no!' Meriem cried. 'Never mind

about me. I'm used to cold. It doesn't matter. If we go on walking, it won't hurt me. But you English are more delicately brought up than we are.'

'In a crisis,' Eustace answered, with prompt decision, 'one man must be dictator and order about the others. Don't answer me back. Do as you're bid, Meriem. The lives of the people at St. Cloud depend upon it.'

Meriem knew in her heart he spoke the truth.

They made the exchange in silence, and then marched on across the deep, soft snow. The socks kept Meriem's feet warm; a nest of club-moss sufficed for Eustace. The snow lay flaky and powdery, as it often lies on mountain-heights; and the slight Col between the peaks that they were endeavouring to surmount rose still many hundred feet above them. In places the drifts covered with their deceptively even sheet great hollows and bowls in the underlying

surface ; in places their feet struck sharp rocks or jagged ends of ledges an inch or so below the treacherous and glistening level. As long as the moon shone, however, all still went well ; but in the very jaws of the gap between the two twin mountains, thin clouds began to drive up slowly from southwestward—an ominous quarter—and flakes to fall here and there in their faces as they went, at long intervals. Gradually the flakes followed faster and faster ; and just as they reached the summit level of the Ccl, a perfect storm of snow, in blinding masses, beat fiercely against them. Meriem was weary now with much tramping through the drifts, and ill-clad still in her light and simple Kabyle garments. She drew her haik tighter and tighter yet around her, and battled bravely against the cutting blast that drove wildly in her face ; but her lips were blue and her teeth chattered, and Eustace began to fear in his soul she would never get through to descend upon

the warmer side of the valley towards Bouira.

At last, as the storm drove fiercer in their faces, she sat down exhausted in the soft snow.

‘Leave me, Eustace,’ she said, in a weary voice, like a child that can hardly keep its eyes open. ‘I can go no further. For Vernon’s sake and Iris’s, go on without me.’

To sit down, wearied out, in the snow to rest, is to freeze to death. Le Marchant’s heart almost failed him at the thought. If Meriem was sinking, Meriem was doomed. They could do nothing but sit down there and die together.

END OF VOL. II.